

Health Office Fact Sheet



Conjunctivitis

Conjunctivitis is inflammation (swelling) of the conjunctiva. The conjunctiva is the transparent membrane (thin layer of cells) that covers the white part of the eyeball and the inner surfaces of the eyelids.

There are three types of conjunctivitis, each with a different cause. These are:

- irritant conjunctivitis
- allergic conjunctivitis
- infective conjunctivitis

Irritant conjunctivitis

Irritant conjunctivitis occurs when an irritant, such as chlorine (a chemical often used to purify water) or an eyelash, gets into the eyes, making them sore. Do not rub the eyes as this can make the condition worse. The conjunctivitis should settle once the irritant is removed. If the eyes are very red and painful, seek medical attention immediately.

Allergic conjunctivitis

Allergic conjunctivitis occurs when the eyes come into contact with an allergen. An allergen is a substance that makes the immune system (the body's defense system) react abnormally, causing irritation and inflammation.

Infective Conjunctivitis

- reddening and watering of the eyes
- a sticky coating on the eyelashes, particularly when waking up in the morning

How common is infective conjunctivitis?

Infective conjunctivitis is very common and is responsible for 35% of all eye-related problems recorded in GP surgeries. There are 13-14 cases for every 1,000 people every year.

Infective conjunctivitis is most common in children and the elderly. This may be because children come into contact with more infections at school. Elderly people may be more prone to infections as their immune system (the body's defense system) may be weaker.

Contagiousness

Cases of pinkeye that are caused by bacteria and viruses are contagious; cases caused by allergies or environmental irritants are not.

Treatment

Conjunctivitis caused by a virus usually goes away on its own without any treatment. If a doctor suspects that the conjunctivitis has been caused by a bacterial infection, antibiotic eye drops or ointment will be prescribed.

If your child has pinkeye and starts to develop increased swelling, redness, and tenderness in the eyelids and around the eye, along with a fever, call your doctor. Those symptoms may mean the infection has started to spread beyond the conjunctiva and will require additional treatment.

For most people, the condition does not cause any complications. However, newborn babies (up to 28 days old) are at risk of a more serious infection. In severe cases, this could permanently damage the eyes.

Children can return to school immediately treatment commences.

For more information the following web sites may be of use:

KidsHealth

Conjunctivitis, Infective - NHS Choices