

CONJUNCTIVITIS

WHAT IS CONJUNCTIVITIS

Conjunctivitis is an inflammation of the conjunctiva, or lining of the eyes. It is commonly known as “Pink Eye” or “Madras Eye”

WHAT CAUSES CONJUNCTIVITIS

Many different conditions, including allergies, various chemicals, foreign bodies, and some systemic illnesses can cause conjunctivitis. Conjunctivitis can be both acute and chronic. The most common cause is infection. Many types of bacteria and viruses can cause conjunctivitis. Chemical conjunctivitis can be caused by exposure to smoke, perfumes and many household cleaners (like bleach). Allergic conjunctivitis can be due to pollen and dust. However, when we commonly talk of conjunctivitis, we usually refer to acute bacterial conjunctivitis. Some of the bacteria that can cause conjunctivitis include *Staphylococcus aureus*, *Streptococcus pneumoniae*, *Haemophilus aegyptiae*, *Haemophilus influenzae*, *Pseudomonas*, *Escherichia coli* and *Neisseria gonorrhoeae*.

HOW IS IT SPREAD

The secretions from an infected eye are extremely contagious and the infection spreads from person to person through these contaminated secretions. It also spreads from one eye to the other in the same manner. Conjunctivitis often comes in small epidemics, with many people being infected in an area.

WHAT ARE THE CLINICAL MANIFESTATIONS OF CONJUNCTIVITIS

The disease affects all ages. School age children are especially vulnerable because they mix with many other children and there is a lot of physical contact between them. The illness starts as an irritating feeling in the eye. This may be described as itching, dryness. There may be excessive watering of the eye. The eye will gradually become more inflamed and turn red. The disease starts in one eye and usually spreads to the other. A mucoid or purulent (pus like) discharge may be present. Depending on the particular cause, this discharge may be profuse and re-accumulate quickly. When the child wakes up in the morning, his eyelids may be matted shut by dried up secretions. In bacterial conjunctivitis, the discharge is usually thick and purulent, whereas, in viral conjunctivitis it is thin and watery.

IS IT DANGEROUS

The common type of infectious conjunctivitis is generally not dangerous. However, pain, irritation by bright light and decreased vision are usually not present. If these symptoms are present, see your doctor immediately because they can be due to other, more serious conditions.

WHAT ARE THE COMPLICATIONS OF CONJUNCTIVITIS

The routine infectious conjunctivitis will usually heal completely, without any after effects. However, very serious infections and other types of conjunctivitis may occasionally have lasting eye complications.

HOW IS CONJUNCTIVITIS TREATED

Infective conjunctivitis is usually treated with antibiotics applied to the eye. It is not possible to tell by looking at the eye whether the infection is bacterial or viral – therefore, it is prudent to treat all types of infective conjunctivitis with antibiotics. Your doctor may request a culture of the secretions to identify the exact organism responsible. The antibiotics can be applied either as drops or as an ointment. The commonest antibiotics used are Gentamicin (Genticin), Chloramphenicol (Chloromycin) and Tetracycline (Terramycin) – Tetracycline should not be given to children who have not attained puberty. The drops should be applied every few hours during the day. At night it is preferable to apply an ointment - this will also prevent the eyes from getting stuck together by secretions. Secretions should be washed off with clean water and the eyes wiped gently with a clean cloth or a piece of cotton moistened in warm water. Frequent hand washing will help reduce spread to others. It is important to treat both eyes, even if only one is affected, because the disease can spread very easily from one eye to the other.

If a household chemical has accidentally splashed in the eye, wash it with plenty of water immediately before calling the doctor. In many instances, washing is all that is necessary.

Allergic conjunctivitis may require anti-histamine medications and, sometimes, steroid eye drops.

WHAT IS THE PROGNOSIS

In simple bacterial or viral conjunctivitis, there is generally complete recovery without any danger to vision. However, other types of conjunctivitis may have different prognoses, depending on the cause and severity.

CAN BE PREVENTED

There is no vaccine for conjunctivitis. If there is a sudden increase in the number of cases in your area, or school, washing hands frequently and not scratching the eyes will help prevent the illness. Dark glasses do not help either to treat or prevent spread. If one person in a family has conjunctivitis, it is preferable to treat all family members to prevent spread.