Quick Facts

About… Conjunctivitis (Pink Eye)

What is conjunctivitis?

Conjunctivitis, or pink eye, is an inflammation or infection of the eye that has many different causes including viruses, bacteria, allergies, or objects in the eye. The most common causes of conjunctivitis are viral and bacterial infections. Conjunctivitis is an irritating and fairly common condition, but rarely causes long term eye or vision damage.

How is conjunctivitis spread?

Conjunctivitis is spread by:

- Direct contact with the infected person's eye drainage or drainage from the person's cough, sneeze, or runny nose
- Indirect contact with objects that may have the infected person's drainage on them (i.e. eye makeup applicators, towels, shared eye medications)
- Contact with the infected person's fingers or hands which may contain the virus or bacteria

Who is at risk for conjunctivitis?

Individuals who are exposed to someone infected with the viral or bacterial form of conjunctivitis are at risk for developing conjunctivitis. Children and adults can develop both bacterial and viral conjunctivitis; however bacterial conjunctivitis is more common in young children.

How do I know if I have conjunctivitis?

Conjunctivitis may create the sensation of having a foreign object in the eye that can't be removed. There may be a discharge coming from the eyes, and the eyes may feel crusted over or pasted shut upon awakening in the morning. If the discharge has a yellow-greenish color, the cause of infection is more likely to be bacterial. The whites of the eyes usually have a pink or reddish cast to them. Other symptoms include:

- Eye pain
- Increased tearing
- Itching of the eye
- Sensitivity to light

If you or your child show symptoms of pink eye it is important to see your doctor.

How can conjunctivitis be treated?

Doctors sometimes, but not always, take a sample of the eye secretion for laboratory testing to determine the type of infection. Bacterial conjunctivitis is treated with antibiotic ointment or eye drops. If the cause is bacterial you should notice improvement within 1-2 days after starting treatment. There is no treatment for viral conjunctivitis, unless very severe.

How is conjunctivitis prevented?

Conjunctivitis can be prevented by:

- Always washing hands with soap and water or an alcohol based hand sanitizer prior to and following contact with a person who has conjunctivitis
- Avoiding hand-to-eye contact
- Not sharing personal articles that come in contact with the eyes (i.e eye make-up applicators, towels, wash cloths, eye droppers)
- Changing towels and wash cloths daily
- Changing pillow cases often

All information presented is intended for public use. For more information, please refer to:

The National Institutes of Health Website at:
http://www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/ency/article/001010.htm

The KidsHealth Website at:
http://www.kidshealth.org/parent/infections/eye/conjunctivitis.html

This page was last reviewed May 2010.

Indiana State
Department of Health