

Conjunctivitis (Pink eye)

Community and Public Health

Phone: 03 364 1777

Fax: 03 379 6484

Web: www.cph.co.nz

Conjunctivitis is inflammation or infection of the conjunctiva, the clear membrane lining the eyelids and covering the eye.

It may be caused by a virus or bacteria, or by an allergy or reaction to something (e.g. physical or chemical) in the environment.

What are the symptoms?

- Irritation, gritty feeling and redness of the eye
- A discharge
- Crusts that form on the eyelid overnight
- Tears
- Eye pain
- Swelling of the eyelids (in severe cases)
- Sensitivity to light
- Symptoms appear 24-72 hours after catching conjunctivitis
- More likely to be in just one eye with only a slight discharge, and may be associated with other symptoms like a sore throat.

How is it caught?

It is spread through contact with the discharge from the eye of an infected person. This can be transmitted through fingers and towels or other articles contaminated by these secretions. It can also be spread from person to person by contact with an infected person and then touching the eyes.

In some cases, nose and throat secretions may also be infectious. A person is contagious while they have a discharge.

Children should stay away from school/day care until their eye is no longer pink or until after 24 hours of treatment.

How is it treated?

It is best to see a doctor if you or your child has conjunctivitis. The bacterial form of conjunctivitis should be treated with antibiotic eye drops or ointment,



Who is affected?

Children under the age of five are most often affected with the bacterial form, but people of all ages can be infected with viral conjunctivitis. Conjunctivitis may recur.

Viral conjunctivitis differs from bacterial conjunctivitis by being more likely to cause a watery discharge that can be crusty in the morning but not pus-like. It usually begins in one eye then affects the other eye within 24-48 hours and may include cold-like symptoms.

Newborn babies can catch a form of conjunctivitis from the mother's birth canal and can be serious and needs prompt treatment with antibiotics.

How is the spread prevented?

Good hygiene helps prevent the spread of conjunctivitis, and this includes:

- Keeping hands away from the eye,
- Washing hands frequently,
- Replacing eye cosmetics regularly,
- Not sharing towels or handkerchiefs,
- Proper use and care of contact lenses.

The discharge is highly infectious and therefore the eyes should be kept clean by gentle wiping with a clean damp cloth and clean fresh water.

The used cloth should be either washed before re-use or thrown away.

What about staying away from school or preschool?

Children should be kept away from childcare centres or school while the eyes are weeping, because the discharge is so infectious.

Adults do not need to stay away from work but still need to wash hands thoroughly if the eyes are touched.

Do you require further information?

For further information contact:

- Your local doctor or practice nurse
- Your local Public Health Nurse
- Communicable Diseases at Community and Public Health
- www.health.govt.nz



Other resources available on childhood infections

- Rotavirus
- Measles
- Hand, foot and mouth disease
- Ringworm
- Slapped cheek disease
- Conjunctivitis
- Threadworms

Contact Community and Public Health for more information:

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