
What is conjunctivitis?

The white part of your eye and the inner surfaces of your eyelids are covered by a transparent membrane (thin layer of cells) known as the conjunctiva. If the conjunctiva becomes inflamed, you have a condition called conjunctivitis.

There are three types of conjunctivitis – irritant (e.g. caused by chemicals), allergic (e.g. caused by pollen), and infective. This leaflet deals with infective conjunctivitis.

Infective conjunctivitis can be caused by viruses and bacteria.

Infective conjunctivitis rarely requires any medical treatment because the infection will normally heal by itself, usually within 1-2 weeks. For most people, infective conjunctivitis does not cause any complications.

Those most at risk of developing complications from infective conjunctivitis are newborn babies, who are 28 days old, or younger. An infection in the eye at a very young age can cause permanent damage.

What are the symptoms?

The most common symptoms include reddening and watering of the eyes. You may also notice a sticky coating on your eyelashes, particularly when you first wake in the morning, which can make your eyes feel like they are stuck together. Infective conjunctivitis is most common in children and the elderly.

How is it passed on?

There are a variety of factors which can cause an infection to develop in your eye.

There are no particular signs or symptoms that will allow your optician or GP to distinguish between a bacterial infection and a viral infection. Both types of conjunctivitis will normally heal by themselves. Untreated conjunctivitis caused by a sexually transmitted infection (STI) will usually last for several months, rather than weeks.

The best way to stop infective conjunctivitis spreading is to make sure that you thoroughly wash your hands after touching, or treating, your infected eyes. If you do not have the infection, but someone close to you does, you should make sure that you wash your hands every time you come into contact with them. You should also avoid sharing towels, pillows, and flannels in order to prevent the infection from spreading.

How should it be managed?

Marked eye pain, light hurting your eyes and reduced vision are not features of common infective conjunctivitis - tell your doctor if these or other worrying symptoms develop.

Conjunctivitis in a newborn baby less than 28 days old is different to the common 'sticky eye' of newborn babies, and needs urgent attention from a doctor.

It is very important for you to seek medical assistance if you experience these symptoms because it may be an indication that there is a more serious condition that is causing them. This is why it is important for your optician or GP to rule out any other conditions which, if undiagnosed, may possibly cause serious complications.

You may have an eye swab taken to determine the cause of the infection. If your infective conjunctivitis is caused by an STI, you will have to undergo screening and treatment for the infection.

Unless there is a large and severe outbreak of infective conjunctivitis at your child's school, you will not have to keep your child at home. It is not advisable to exclude children from schools, or playgroups, if they have a mild, infectious illness, such as a cold or infective conjunctivitis.

Can it be treated?

There are a number of ways to tackle infective conjunctivitis:

- Not treating is a common option for mild or moderate infections as the antibiotics may not be needed and can cause side effects. The tears contain chemicals that fight off bacteria. Without treatment most cases of infective conjunctivitis clear on their own within 1-2 weeks, and often within 2-5 days. If symptoms worsen then see an optician or doctor to see if you need treatment.
- Bathing the eyes with cool clean water may be soothing.
- Lubricant eye drops may reduce eye discomfort. These are available over the counter, as well as on prescription.
- An antibiotic eye drop or ointment may be prescribed in some cases. This tends to be for more severe cases, or for those that do not clear on their own. (Tell your optician or doctor if you are pregnant as some eye drops may not be suitable.)

In addition:

- Do not wear contact lenses until symptoms have completely gone, and for 24 hours after the last dose of any eye drops or ointment.
- Clean away secretions from eyelids and lashes with cotton wool soaked in water.

Need further advice or information?

- NHS Inform www.nhsinform.co.uk
- NHS24 on 111 or www.nhs24.co.uk
- www.nhsborders.scot.nhs.uk
- Local health clinic, optician or GP

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