



Pink Eye (Conjunctivitis)

Overview

Conjunctivitis, also called "pinkeye", is defined as an inflammation of the conjunctiva. The conjunctiva is the thin membrane that lines the inner surface of the eyelids and the whites of the eyes (called the sclera) Conjunctivitis can affect children and adults. The most common symptoms of conjunctivitis include a red eye and discharge. There are many potential causes of conjunctivitis, including bacterial or viral infections, allergies, or a non-specific condition (eg, a foreign body in the eye). All types of conjunctivitis cause a red eye, although not everyone with a red eye has conjunctivitis.

Causes

There are four main types of conjunctivitis: viral, bacterial, allergic, and non-specific. Most cases of infectious conjunctivitis are viral in adults and children; however, bacterial conjunctivitis is more common in children than in adults.

Viral conjunctivitis

Viral conjunctivitis is typically caused by a virus that can also cause the common cold. A person may have symptoms of conjunctivitis alone, or as part of a general cold syndrome, with swollen lymph nodes (glands), fever, a sore throat, and runny nose.

Viral conjunctivitis is highly contagious. It is spread by contact, usually with objects which have come into contact with the infected person's eye secretions. As examples, the virus can be transmitted when an infected person touches their eye and then touches another surface (eg, door handle) or shares an object that has touched their eye (eg, a towel or pillow case).

The most common symptoms of viral conjunctivitis include redness, watery or mucus discharge, and a burning, sandy, or gritty feeling in one eye. Some people have morning crusting followed by watery discharge, perhaps with some scant mucus discharge throughout the day. The second eye usually becomes infected within 24 to 48 hours.

There is no cure for viral conjunctivitis. Recovery can begin within days, although the symptoms frequently get worse for the first three to five days, with gradual improvement over the following one to two weeks for a total course of two to three weeks. Some people experience morning crusting that continues for up to two weeks after the initial symptoms, although the daytime redness, irritation, and tearing should be much improved.

Bacterial conjunctivitis

Bacterial conjunctivitis is highly contagious, often affecting multiple family members or children within a classroom. Bacterial conjunctivitis is spread by contact, usually with objects which have come into contact with the infected person's eye secretions. As examples, the bacterium can be transmitted when an infected person touches their eye and then touches another surface (eg, door handle) or shares an object that has touched their eye (eg, a towel or pillow case).

The most common symptoms of bacterial conjunctivitis include redness and thick discharge from one eye, although both eyes can become infected. The discharge may be yellow, white, or green, and it usually continues to drain throughout the day. The affected eye often is "stuck shut" in the morning.

Most types of bacterial conjunctivitis resolve quickly and cause no permanent damage when treated with antibiotic eye drops or ointment.

Allergic conjunctivitis

Allergic conjunctivitis is caused by airborne allergens that come in contact with the eye. Symptoms (most commonly redness, watery discharge, and itching of both eyes) may be sudden in onset (acute), seasonal, or present year-round (perennial), depending upon the allergen. Allergic conjunctivitis is discussed in a separate topic.

Care Advice

The treatment of conjunctivitis depends upon the cause. For this reason, it is important to have the correct diagnosis before treatment begins.

Viral conjunctivitis treatment

A topical antihistamine/decongestant eye drop may help to relieve the irritation of viral conjunctivitis. These drops are available without a prescription in most pharmacies. However, particular care must be taken to avoid spreading viral infections from one eye to the other. Apply drops only to affected eye and wash hands thoroughly after application. Similar to cold medicines, this treatment may reduce the symptoms but does not shorten the course of the infection. Another option is to use warm or cool compresses, as needed.

The irritation and discharge may get worse for three to five days before getting better, and symptoms can persist for two to three weeks.

Bacterial conjunctivitis treatment

Bacterial conjunctivitis is usually treated with an antibiotic eye drop or ointment. When started early, treatment helps to shorten the duration of symptoms, although most cases do resolve spontaneously if no treatment is used. Ointment is generally preferred for young children and

those who have difficulty applying eye drops. Ointment should be applied inside the lower eyelid. Even if the ointment is not applied directly inside the eyelid, it is usually effective because it sticks to the lid and is spread with blinking. Vision may be blurred for up to 20 minutes after use of ointment.

Contact lens wearers

People who wear contact lenses should be evaluated by a healthcare provider before treatment begins; this is to confirm the diagnosis of conjunctivitis and to be sure that another, more serious condition related to contact lens use (an infection of the cornea), is not present.

People who wear contact lenses should avoid wearing the lenses during the first 24 hours of treatment, or until the eye is no longer red. The contact case should be thrown away and the contacts disinfected overnight or replaced (if disposable).

Prevention

Hand washing

Bacterial and viral conjunctivitis are both highly contagious and spread by direct contact with secretions or contact with contaminated objects. Simple hygiene measures can help minimize transmission to others. Washing your hands frequently is the best method to avoid spreading conjunctivitis.

Return to work/school

The safest approach to avoid spreading viral and bacterial conjunctivitis to others is to stay home until there is no longer any discharge from the eye(s). However, this is not practical for most students and for those who work outside the home. Most daycare centers and schools require that students receive 24 hours of antibiotic eye drops or ointment before returning to school. This treatment helps to prevent the spread of bacterial conjunctivitis, but is not necessary or helpful for children with viral conjunctivitis.

Viral conjunctivitis is similar to a cold because it spreads easily between people. Younger children, who may not remember to wash their hands or avoid touching their eyes, should probably not attend school until the discharge has resolved. Older students or adults may choose to attend school/work, although they should limit close contact with others.