

## Conjunctivitis

Infective conjunctivitis is an infection of the conjunctiva (the front skin of the eye). It is very common. One or both eyes become red or pink, they may be sticky or watery and may have surface irritation. Most cases clear in a few days without any treatment. Antibiotic drops or ointments may be advised if the infection is severe or does not settle. 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 is different to the common 'sticky eye' of newborn babies, and needs urgent attention from a doctor.

### What are the symptoms of infective conjunctivitis?

The symptoms of infective conjunctivitis are generally very mild. Because the conjunctiva does not cover the iris and pupil, conjunctivitis should not affect light getting into the eye and should not affect vision.

Vision can appear blurred or misted because of discharge smeared over the surface of the eye, but this will usually clear on blinking or wiping the eyes.

Because the conjunctiva (unlike the cornea, which covers the iris and pupil) is not very sensitive, conjunctivitis is usually uncomfortable rather than painful.

- The main symptom of infective conjunctivitis is 'pink eye'. The eye looks pink or red.
- Infective conjunctivitis often begins most obviously in one eye but quickly spreads to both eyes. The whites of the eyes look inflamed.
- The eyes may feel gritty and may water more than usual.
- Some mild soreness may develop, particularly if you rub the eyes.
- The eyelids may become swollen. They may be stuck together with gluey material (discharge) after a sleep. This is particularly common in bacterial conjunctivitis.
- Vision is not normally affected. You may develop some blurring of vision, due to discharge at the front of the eye. However, this clears with blinking.

Conjunctivitis does not normally require a healthcare professional to diagnose it. You will realise that you (or your child) have conjunctivitis if you have the signs and symptoms above. However, if you have a pink or red eye with any of the symptoms below, you should seek medical advice as they suggest a different problem.

You should also, always, seek medical advice if you suspect conjunctivitis in a newborn baby. **Note:** whilst a sticky eye due a blocked tear duct is a very common condition in babies, this condition does not cause reddening of the conjunctiva.

### What's the treatment?

Most episodes of infective conjunctivitis settle down in less than a week with simple self-management. That means that in many cases, you don't need medical help at all.

Antibiotics are only occasionally needed.

- **Not treating** - this is a common option for mild or moderate infections. Your tears contain chemicals that fight off germs (bacteria). If symptoms become worse then see a doctor to check your eye and to see if you need treatment.
- **Bathing the eyes** - using cool clean water; this may be soothing.
- **Lubricating eye drops** - these may reduce eye discomfort. They are available over the counter, as well as on prescription.

## Antibiotic preparations

These may be prescribed and might be:

- Eye drops such as [chloramphenicol](#).
- Eye ointment such as chloramphenicol or [fusidic acid](#) (actually an oily drop, halfway between an ointment and a drop).

**Note:** treatment using antibiotic preparations tends to be for more severe cases, as they make very little difference in mild cases, which get better anyway. It is also used for those cases not clearing on their own. (Tell your doctor if you are pregnant, as some eye drops may not be suitable.)

## Other general advice

- Do not wear contact lenses until symptoms have completely gone and for 24 hours after the last dose of any eye drops or ointment.
- You can clean secretions from eyelids and lashes with cotton wool soaked in water.
- Infective conjunctivitis is contagious, which means it can be passed on by touching. The likelihood of passing on the infection is not high unless you are in close contact with others. Washing your hands regularly, particularly after touching your eyes, and not sharing towels or pillows, will help avoid it.

## When should I seek medical help?

See a doctor if symptoms change, or do not settle within a few days, or if you are concerned that you have anything other than a common conjunctivitis. In particular, see a doctor urgently if:

- You develop marked eye pain.
- Light starts to hurt your eyes (photophobia).
- Spots or blisters develop on the skin next to the eye.
- Your vision becomes affected.
- Your newborn or very young baby develops conjunctivitis.

**Patient Info** <https://patient.info/health/eye-problems/infective-conjunctivitis>

**NHS Choices** <https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/conjunctivitis/>