



Great Ormond Street Hospital for Children NHS Foundation Trust: Information for Families

# Conjunctivitis

**This information sheet from Great Ormond Street Hospital explains the causes, symptoms and treatment of conjunctivitis and where to get help.**

**Conjunctivitis is a very common eye infection. It involves the inflammation (swelling) of the conjunctiva which is the thin delicate membrane that covers the whites of the eyes and lines the inside of the eyelids.**

Most children will suffer from conjunctivitis at least once while they are growing up. It isn't usually serious – in most cases, it clears up quickly with the help of eye drops prescribed by the doctor.

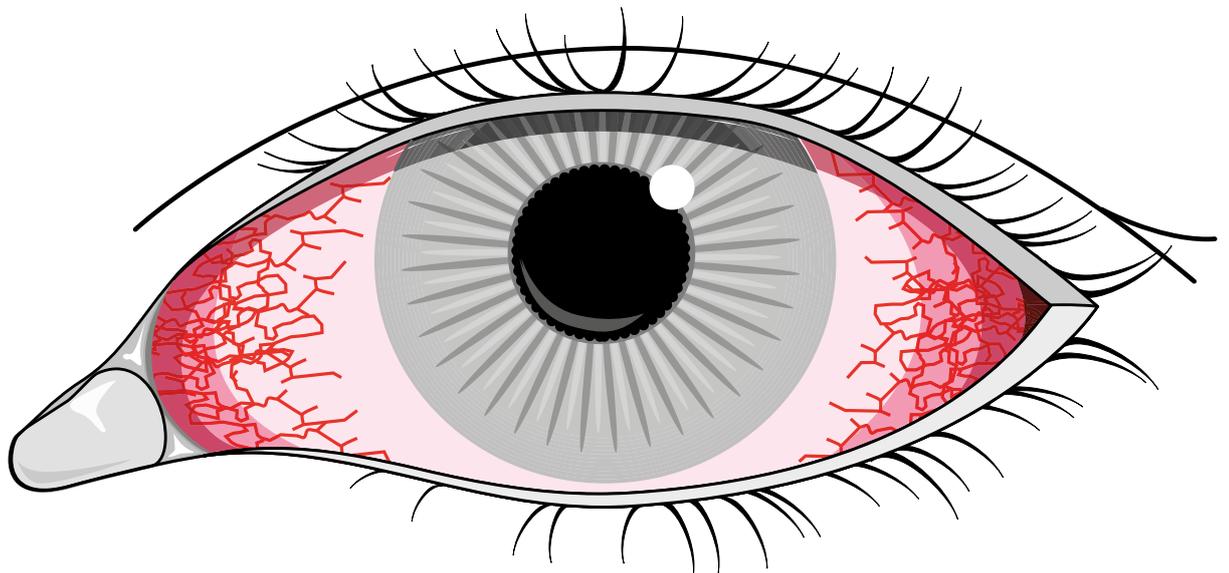
## What causes conjunctivitis?

Conjunctivitis can either be caused by a bacterial infection or by an allergy.

Newborn babies are especially prone to conjunctivitis as a result of bacterial infection in the birth canal.

In older children, the cause is usually a virus, a bacteria or an allergy.

Viral or bacterial conjunctivitis is infectious. In other words it can pass from one eye to the other, and from one person to another. This might happen by sharing towels.





Allergic conjunctivitis is not infectious – it cannot be passed from one person to another. It is common in people who have hayfever and asthma, and is caused by pollen and dust that irritate the eyes.

A child may also suffer from conjunctivitis in response to:

- certain medicines or foods
- certain chemicals, such as those used in swimming pools
- smoke or fumes

These types of conjunctivitis are rare.

## What are the signs and symptoms of conjunctivitis?

A child is likely to have red, itchy eyes and sticky eyelids. Their eyes will be watering more than usual, and may have a discharge. The discharge might be more noticeable in the morning – for example, they may have a crusting on their eyelid when they first wake up.

If it is infectious conjunctivitis and caused by bacteria, the discharge will be yellow. If it is allergic conjunctivitis, the discharge is watery and clear. Viral conjunctivitis causes a sticky clear discharge and is almost always accompanied by flu-like symptoms.

An older child may complain that their eye feels sore, that they have a 'gritty' feeling in their eye, or that their vision is blurred.

Infectious conjunctivitis usually starts in one eye then spreads to the other. Allergic conjunctivitis usually starts in both eyes at the same time.

## How is conjunctivitis normally diagnosed and treated?

A child with symptoms of conjunctivitis should visit the doctor. A GP may take a swab (sample) of the discharge from the eye that can be tested for any bacteria or virus.

The type of treatment the child will need will depend on the type of conjunctivitis they have:

- If the child's doctor thinks the infection is caused by bacteria, they will recommend a course of antibiotic eye drops.
- If it's a viral infection, they will recommend a different type of eye drops that reduce inflammation.
- If the child's conjunctivitis is caused by an allergic reaction, the doctor will probably suggest antihistamine medication to soothe the irritation.

Eye drops won't be painful but might cause a slight stinging sensation (like putting water in the eyes). Read our information on how to give your child eye drops, available on our website along with a short video film demonstrating what to do.

A child's symptoms can also be relieved by gently cleaning away any crusty discharge with clean cotton wool soaked in boiled, cooled water. Start in the corner of the eye, and gently wipe to the outer eye. Use a separate piece of cotton wool for each eye to prevent spreading the infection.

Make sure the child does not share towels or flannels with anyone else in the family to contain the infection.



## What happens next?

If the child's conjunctivitis is caused by an infection, it can be prevented from spreading by making sure the child:

- washes their hands frequently
- tries not to touch or rub their eyes
- doesn't use towels that are shared with other people.

Conjunctivitis is quite common and shouldn't cause any damage to a child's eyes or any long-term vision problems.

If their symptoms last longer than one week, despite using eye drops, it's best to go back to the doctor. They will refer the child to a paediatric ophthalmologist.

### Notes

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