



HEALTH INFORMATION

Conjunctivitis

What is Conjunctivitis?

Conjunctivitis is redness and inflammation of the thin layer of tissue that covers the front of the eye (conjunctiva). It is very common. The conjunctiva can become inflamed as result of: a bacterial or viral infection – this is known as infective conjunctivitis; an allergic reaction to a substance such as pollen or dust mites – this is known as allergic conjunctivitis; and the eye coming into contact with substances that can irritate the conjunctiva, such as chlorinated water or shampoo, or a loose eyelash rubbing against the eye – this is known as irritant conjunctivitis.

Symptoms

The symptoms of conjunctivitis will depend on the cause, but the general symptoms include:

- eye redness
- watering eyes
- a burning sensation in your eyes
- a feeling of grit in your eyes
- a sticky coating on the eyelashes – usually when you first wake in the morning
- an enlarged lymph node in front of the ear
- You may also have itchy eyes if you have allergic conjunctivitis and your allergy may have other symptoms such as sneezing and a runny or blocked nose

Most cases of conjunctivitis are not a cause for concern but contact your GP if you think you have it, especially if you think the conjunctivitis is related to wearing contact lenses. Your GP will be able to check whether there is a more serious underlying cause of your symptoms.

Seek immediate medical advice if you have one or more of the following: pain in your eyes, sensitivity to light (photophobia), disturbed vision, and intense redness in one or both of your eyes.

Treatment

The type of treatment which is suitable depends on the cause of your conjunctivitis. General treatments for conjunctivitis include not wearing contact lenses, using lubricant eye drops, gently cleaning away any discharges, and washing your hands regularly. Viral conjunctivitis is largely self-limiting but in addition to the above measures many find a cold cloth over the eyes soothing.

If your conjunctivitis is caused by bacteria or is likely to have bacterial infection as a side effect antibiotics may be recommended.

With allergic conjunctivitis avoiding exposure to allergens is recommended; antihistamines or corticosteroids may be useful if the case is severe. Most cases of irritant conjunctivitis do not require any treatment as the condition should clear up once the irritant is removed from the eye, this may require washing the eye which in extreme cases should take place in hospital.

Is it Contagious?

Infective conjunctivitis can be contagious. Viral conjunctivitis is very contagious and can cause epidemics in communities. Transmission can be by direct or indirect contact with infected individuals. The onset of symptoms may be preceded by cold or flu like symptoms. Bacterial conjunctivitis is also contagious and may be caused by the sexually transmitted diseases gonorrhoea and chlamydia.