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Patient Information: Conjunctivitis – Infective

Conjunctivitis means inflammation of the conjunctiva. The conjunctiva is the thin 'skin' that covers the white part of the eyes and the inside of the eyelids. There are many causes but most infective cases are caused by either bacteria or viruses. Most bouts of infective conjunctivitis are not serious, and soon clear.

Photograph of a severe case of bacterial conjunctivitis



Signs and symptoms

Sore, gritty, red eyes, and discharge which may be watery or sticky, depending on the cause. This makes the eyes sticky in the mornings. One eye may be infected, but it usually spreads to both eyes. Some soreness may develop, but it is not usually very painful. Vision is not normally affected.

Treatment

Bacterial conjunctivitis is easily treated with antibiotic drops or ointment and usually settles down over about 10 days. There is no direct treatment for viral conjunctivitis. It

will gradually clear up on its own, but often antibiotic drops (eg: chloramphenicol) are prescribed to prevent a secondary.

bacterial infection occurring. (Tell your doctor if you are pregnant as some antibiotic eye drops are not suitable.)

Occasionally swabs are taken to determine the cause of the conjunctivitis but this is not usually necessary.

Conjunctivitis is infectious, so it is important that you follow some basic advice:

1. Keep your face flannel separate from those of the rest of the family.
2. Wash your hands thoroughly after touching your eyes.
3. Use tissues, should you need to wipe your eyes, and dispose of them immediately afterwards.
4. Do not allow anyone else to use your eye drops or ointment. Throw them away when your treatment is finished.
5. Do not wear contact lenses when you have conjunctivitis, or when you use antibiotic eye drops or ointments.

Most infections start to settle on treatment after a few days. However, you should see your doctor again if any of the following occur

1. Symptoms change (for example, light starts to hurt your eyes).
2. Pain becomes worse (mild soreness rather than pain is usual with conjunctivitis).
3. Spots or blisters develop on the skin next to the eye.
4. Your vision becomes affected.

Disclaimer

The information provided in this document is intended as a useful aid to general practitioners, optometrists and patients. It is impossible to diagnose and treat patients adequately without a thorough eye examination by a qualified ophthalmologist, optometrist or your general practitioner. Hopefully the information will be of use prior to and following a consultation which it supplements and does not replace.

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