

Conjunctivitis/ Pink Eye

Conjunctivitis, or “pink eye”, is an inflammation of the thin outer layer of the eyeball, and the inner surface of the eyelids. Viruses or bacteria may cause it. The prevalence of viral pink eye depends upon the season. During the cold and flu season, most pink eye is viral. Just like other viral infections, it does not respond to antibiotics. Antibiotics do shorten the duration of bacterial conjunctivitis. However, most children with bacterial pink eye are able to successfully fight off the infection without medication. In other words, the vast majority of children with pink eye will get better without antibiotic drops.

This being said, conjunctivitis is highly contagious, and can remain so for up to 2 weeks. People get conjunctivitis by coming into contact with the tears or discharges from the eyes of an infected person and then touching their own eyes. When associated with an upper respiratory infection (common cold), conjunctivitis can also be spread by droplets (eg. sneezing, coughing).

Symptoms of conjunctivitis that should be seen by your primary physician:

- Redness, irritation, itchiness, tearing
- Clear or yellow discharge that may make the eyelids stick together
- Swelling of the eyelids

Symptoms of a more severe eye infection that should be seen by an ophthalmologist:

- Severe eye pain
- Change in vision
- Extreme sensitivity to light
- Marked heat and swelling of eyelids.

Frequent hand washing is the best defense against spreading or acquiring the infection. At home, do not share towels or face cloths. Over the counter normal saline drops, such as “Little Tears” may help comfort the eyes. Store the bottle in the refrigerator, and the chilled drops are soothing. Throw out the bottle when this episode of conjunctivitis is finished. Warm compresses will help soak off any crusty discharge. Cool compresses may help relieve itching. In school, we ask the children not to share pencils, or books when we are aware of a case of pink eye. We also encourage the children not to touch their own eyes, mouth, or nose. Children with the above mentioned symptoms need to be seen by their physician and obtain a note, clearing them to return to school. Your child must be free of eye discharge and tearing to return to school, as this is the primary means for spreading the infection. Feel free to send the note in with your child or fax it to the health office at 609-921-9198. Please notify the school nurse when your child is returning to school after pink eye. You will be notified if someone in your child’s class is diagnosed with pink eye. Thank you for helping to keep our community healthy.