

# Conjunctivitis



## What is it?

Conjunctivitis (also known as “pink eye”) is inflammation of the thin layer of tissue that covers the front of the eye (the conjunctiva). It is a very common self-limiting condition that can be caused by a bacterial or a viral infection (infective conjunctivitis). Conjunctivitis can also be caused by allergic reaction to substances such as pollen and dust or when the eye is exposed to irritants including chlorinated water and shampoo.

## What are the symptoms?

Symptoms of conjunctivitis are:

- Swelling and watering of the eyes
- Burning sensation
- Feeling of grit in the eye
- Itchy eyes (more common in allergic conjunctivitis).

The white of the eye may appear red or pink and there may be a discharge which causes the eyelids to stick together, making them difficult to open  
Light might cause pain in the eye and increase the watery discharge

## Is it infectious?

Yes, bacterial or viral conjunctivitis is usually spread from person to person by direct or indirect contact with the discharge from the eye.

## Does an affected child or staff member need to be excluded from school?

Exclusion from school if an individual has conjunctivitis is not required unless they are feeling particularly unwell.

Parents should be encouraged to notify the school if their child has conjunctivitis to ensure that staff can take preventative action to reduce the risk of transmission to others. This includes;

- Ensuring that the affected child uses paper towels after handwashing (or has a dedicated hand towel which must be washed / changed daily )
- Ensuring the child does not share flannels while in school
- Discouraging close facial contact between infected and non-infected children.

Hand washing will help to minimise the spread of the infection. Wash hands before treating the eye and again afterwards.

If there are a number of cases of conjunctivitis at one school or nursery, staff should contact the health protection team to discuss further actions as it may be necessary to consider exclusion in these instances.

Generally adults who work in close contact with others or share equipment such as phones and computers should not return to work until the discharge has cleared up.

### What is the incubation period?

This is variable depending on the cause, usually:

- One - three days for bacteria
- One -12 days for viruses (but this may be longer for certain eye infections in small babies).

### When is it infectious?

Usually from the time symptoms appear until they have resolved. Some patients with viral infections may be infectious for up to 14 days after symptoms start

### How can spread be prevented?

- Advise parents to seek advice.
- Encourage children not to rub their eyes.
- Conjunctivitis often doesn't require treatment as the symptoms usually clear up within a couple of weeks. If treatment is necessary, the type of treatment will depend on the cause. In severe cases antimicrobial eye drops may be prescribed.
- Allergic conjunctivitis can usually be treated with anti-allergy medications such as **antihistamines**. If possible, avoid the substance that triggered the allergy.
- Washing hands regularly, cleaning any contaminated items (such as toys or crayons) and avoiding sharing pillows or towels will help prevent it spreading.

### Newborn babies

- Advise parents to seek advice immediately if there is a possibility their baby has infective conjunctivitis (also called neonatal conjunctivitis).  
If this is not possible, call **NHS 111** or the local out-of-hours service as the GP will need to examine the baby closely for sticky eyes or infective conjunctivitis.

**Any newborn baby with infective conjunctivitis will need to be referred to an eye specialist urgently for treatment.**

More information on conjunctivitis can be found in chapter nine of the **Health protection in schools and childcare facilities** guidance.