



CONJUNCTIVITIS (Pink Eye)

Conjunctivitis is an infection of the eyes commonly known as “pink eye”. Conjunctivitis can be purulent or nonpurulent. It is most often caused by a virus (like those which cause the common cold), but can also be caused by bacteria, allergies or chemicals. The conjunctiva – the clear layer over the whites of the eyes – becomes pink and there may be tearing and discharge from the eyes. Eyes may be itchy or even painful. In the morning, the discharge may make the eyelids stick together. Conjunctivitis is a mild illness. Viral conjunctivitis will go away by itself in one to three weeks.

Who gets this disease?

Anyone can get it. Conjunctivitis is caused by a virus or bacterium and is highly contagious. Preschoolers and school-age children have it most often and can spread it to people taking care of them or to each other.

How is it spread?

Both viral and bacterial conjunctivitis spread by contact with discharge from the eye. Children often pass it along by rubbing their eyes and getting discharge on their hands and then:

- a) Touches another child’s eye.
- b) Touches another child’s hands. The second child then touches his/her eyes.
- c) Touches an object. Another child touches the object and then puts his/her hands into his/her eyes.

Staff washing, drying or wiping a child’s face and then using the same washcloth/towel/paper towel/tissue on another child’s face can also pass it along. Staff could also get eye discharge on their hands when wiping a child’s eyes and then pass it along as outlined above.

The incubation period varies depending upon the cause whether it is viral or bacterial; symptoms may develop in 5 –12 days depending on the cause. (Bacterial 24-72 hours, viral 12 hours to 12 days).

How is it diagnosed and treated?

Signs and symptoms of purulent conjunctivitis are white or colored discharge from the eye, eye redness, eyelid swelling, eye pain, and sometime fever. It is often difficult to tell if the cause is bacterial or viral. Occasionally the doctor will examine the discharge under the microscope or culture it. Often an antibiotic eye medicine will be given because treatment of bacterial conjunctivitis shortens the length of symptoms and decreases infectiousness. There is not treatment for viral conjunctivitis; it will go away by itself but may last a week or more.

Signs and symptoms of nonpurulent conjunctivitis are clear watery discharge from the eye, without eye redness or pain or fever.

How can the spread of this disease be prevented?

1. Follow hand washing and center cleanliness guidelines.
2. Teach children to avoid rubbing their eyes
3. Keep children’s eyes wiped free of discharge.
4. Always use disposable tissues/towels for wiping and washing. **Never** use the same tissue/towel for more than one child.
5. **Always wash your hands after wiping a child’s eyes.**
6. Teach children to wash their hands after wiping their eyes.
7. Dispose of tissues/towels in lined, covered container kept away from food and childcare materials.

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8. Be sure articles that may touch children's eyes (e.g., pillowcases, sheets, towels, binoculars, prisms, toy cameras) are washed well with soap and hot water at least once daily.

Who should be excluded?

It is recommended that children and staff with purulent conjunctivitis be excluded from childcare until examined by a *healthcare provider* and approved for re-admission, with or without treatment. Children with nonpurulent conjunctivitis do not need to be excluded from childcare.

Reportable?

No. Conjunctivitis is not reportable by New Hampshire state law to the Division of Public Health Services, Bureau of Infectious Disease Control. However, Public Health Professionals are available for consultation at (603) 271-4496.