

Medical guidance notes and information

Conjunctivitis

What is conjunctivitis?

Conjunctivitis is an inflammation of the clear covering of the eye. It is a very common eye condition and it is not serious but can be very uncomfortable and irritating. Conjunctivitis comes on relatively quickly and lasts for a fairly short time. Acute conjunctivitis may clear on its own, but often needs treatment from your doctor.

Causes of conjunctivitis

There are two types of conjunctivitis, contagious and non-contagious. Contagious conjunctivitis is caused by a bacterial or viral infection. Non-contagious conjunctivitis is caused by an allergy. Common allergens include: pollen, animal skin and secretions, perfumes and cosmetics, skin medications, air pollution and smoke.

Signs and symptoms of infectious (contagious) conjunctivitis

- eye pain;
- yellow, green or watery discharge from the eyes which collects overnight and crusts over the eye;
- a gritty feeling in the eye;
- an enlarged lymph gland in front of the ear;
- swelling of the eye;
- redness of the eye;
- intense itching of the eye.

Signs and symptoms of conjunctivitis caused by an allergy (non-contagious)

- intense itching of the eye;
- excessive tearing of the eye;
- swelling of the eye;
- redness of the eye;
- sneezing;
- runny nose.

Prevention and precautions

Infectious conjunctivitis is contagious. Good hand hygiene is essential in preventing the spreading of infectious conjunctivitis. Touching of eyes should be avoided. If eyes have been touched hands should be washed carefully with soap and water. Hand and face towels should not be shared.

Infectious conjunctivitis can also be spread by coughing and sneezing if there is a cold at the same time. Any tissues used should be disposed of immediately after using them.

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Infectious conjunctivitis usually remains contagious until the infection has resolved. This may take several days.

Allergic conjunctivitis is not contagious but good hand hygiene is still as important as always.

Treatment

If you think you may have conjunctivitis, you should see your GP. Treatment is usually by eye drops or/and eye ointment.

Work and conjunctivitis

Normal social contact with a person with conjunctivitis is fine provided the above mentioned precautions are taken.

A person with conjunctivitis may need to be restricted from safety critical work if their eye is painful, itchy and red or if they suffer from visual disturbances. This is often the case with infectious conjunctivitis.

Eye ointment is sometimes used to treat this condition. Eye ointments can cause blurred vision after application and therefore the employee should be restricted from train operating/track work/any duty where visual disturbance would affect their safety for 12 hours after applying the ointment or until side effects settle.

Eye drops are acceptable if employee has no redness or pain of eyes, no visual disturbance and feels well enough. Restrict if any symptoms or any side-effects of eye drops – e.g. stinging eyes.

IF THERE ARE ANY CONCERNS, PLEASE CONTACT OCCUPATIONAL HEALTH FOR FURTHER ADVICE.