

EYE-Q

by R. Thomas Barowsky, MD

Pink Eye is Really Red Eye

School is back in session and you're sure to have your student's teacher send home a note, sooner or later, about one of the children in their class having pink eye. Should you be worried?

Pink eye or, in medical terms, conjunctivitis is an inflammation of the conjunctiva. The conjunctiva is the clear membrane that lines the eyelids and covers the white of the eye.

Conjunctivitis can be caused by many things, including infection by viruses or bacteria. Viruses that cause colds may lead to conjunctivitis. Some bacteria that cause conjunctivitis are chlamydia, staphylococci, and streptococci. Severe conjunctivitis, such as that caused by gonococci, is rare and can cause blindness.

Viral and bacterial forms of conjunctivitis can be spread easily from person to person. They can be spread by coughing or sneezing. In preschool and lower grades, kids have a tendency to look with their hands. If one of the kids comes to school with his/her eye all red this is interesting stuff so everyone wants to "see" and the infection can spread pretty rapidly among the classmates. Bacteria or viruses can get in your eyes through contact with contaminated objects, including hands, washcloths or towels, cosmetics, false eyelashes and soft contact lenses.

Symptoms may include itchy or scratchy eyes, sensitivity to light, redness and swelling of the eyelids in addition to redness of the eyeball, watery discharge in viral infections or a thick pus in bacterial infections.

Your eye doctor will ask about your medical history and if you have been near someone who has conjunctivitis. He or she will examine your eyes and will also check for enlarged lymph nodes near your ear and jaw. Your eye doctor may also get lab tests of a sample of the pus to see what types of germs are present.

Like a cold, viral conjunctivitis will usually go away on its own, even without treatment. However, your eye doctor may prescribe eye drops to help control your symptoms. Antihistamine pills may also relieve the itching and redness.

If you have bacterial conjunctivitis, your eye doctor will prescribe antibiotic eye drops. You can also help your eyes get better by washing them gently to remove any pus or crusts. Then dry them gently with a clean towel. For very severe forms of conjunctivitis, antibiotics may need to be given with a shot or an IV (intravenous).

If you wear contact lenses, you will need to stop wearing them until your eyes are healed. The combination of contacts and conjunctivitis may damage your cornea (the clear outer layer on the front of your eye) and cause severe and permanent vision problems.

Viral conjunctivitis usually gets worse 5 to 7 days after the first symptoms. It can improve in 10 days to 1 month. If only one eye is affected at first, it may take up to 2 weeks for the other eye to be affected. Usually, if both eyes are affected, the first eye has worse conjunctivitis than the second.

Bacterial conjunctivitis should show improvement within 2-3 days after you begin using antibiotics. If your eyes are not improving after 3 days of antibiotics, call your eye doctor.

To keep from getting conjunctivitis from someone who has it, or to keep from spreading it to others, follow these guidelines:

- Wash your hands frequently. Do not touch or rub your eyes.
- Never share eye makeup or cosmetics with anyone. Throw out eye makeup you have been using.
- Never use eye medicine that has been prescribed for someone else.
- Do not share towels, washcloths, or sheets with anyone. If one of your eyes is affected but not the other, use a separate towel for each eye.
- Avoid swimming in swimming pools if you have conjunctivitis.
- Avoid close contact with people until your symptoms improve.

Follow up with your eye doctor for proper treatment.

If you have questions about your eye health e-mail Dr. Barowsky at doctom@tdkj.com and we'll try to answer your questions here at Eye-Q.