

Eye, Eye, Captain!

What to do when a child in a childcare setting has an eye infection

What is conjunctivitis?

Conjunctivitis is a type of infection that affects the surface of the eye and is very common in young children. It can cause streaming or sticky eyes, which can feel itchy as if there is something in the eye. The affected eye(s) can look red and inflamed.

Similar symptoms of sore and irritated eyes can be caused by allergies, for example allergies to pollen or dust mites, or exposure to irritating substances such as shampoo or chlorinated water from swimming pools. This is referred to as allergic or irritative conjunctivitis.

Why do children get conjunctivitis? And how should it be managed?

Conjunctivitis caused by infection is normally a result of a virus or bacteria. It can be very difficult to distinguish between viral or bacterial eye infections. In either case, conjunctivitis will usually get better on its own within a few days without any specific treatment. Antibiotic eye drops can occasionally be helpful if the symptoms are severe but will not necessarily help the infection to get better more quickly. These eye drops will not help at all if the infection is caused by a virus. For most cases of conjunctivitis, prescribing eye drops will make absolutely no difference in terms of how quickly the symptoms improve. If parents are concerned about their child's eye infection they should seek professional advice from their local pharmacist.

How can we stop conjunctivitis from spreading?

As is the case for many other common infections, antibiotics will **not** stop the infection spreading. Only good eye hygiene can stop the spread. It is good practice to observe the best possible standards of hygiene in the care setting, whether or not there is a child with conjunctivitis in attendance.

Things that can help stop the spread of conjunctivitis include:

- ensuring a high standard and frequency of hand washing by children and staff
- using separate towels or flannels for each child
- maintaining a clean environment and equipment.

Do we need to exclude children with conjunctivitis?

There is no requirement to exclude a child with conjunctivitis from school or other childcare setting if they are otherwise feeling well. Similarly, there is no requirement for a child to be prescribed eye drops in order to return to the care setting. If there are concerns about an outbreak or cluster of conjunctivitis cases in a care setting then staff should contact their local NHS Public Health department for advice.

If staff are worried in any way about a child's symptoms, the child feels unwell, or a newborn baby is affected then they should inform the parent or carer.

Up-to-date advice on infection control in childcare settings, including exclusion periods for most common infectious diseases, is available from [Health Protection Scotland](#)

More information on conjunctivitis and how to treat it can also be found on [NHS Inform](#).