Conjunctivitis

What is Conjunctivitis?

Conjunctivitis is an inflammation (swelling) of the conjunctiva, the clear membrane that covers the white part of the eye and the inner surface of the eyelid. It is common among children and adults. Conjunctiva is often called “pink eye” because the eye appears pink or reddish because small blood vessels in the conjunctiva become inflamed and more visible.

Conjunctivitis can be caused by several different things including viruses, bacteria and allergens. Viral conjunctivitis can spread rapidly so early diagnosis and treatment is important in preventing the spread to others. Bacterial conjunctivitis can cause serious damage to the eye if it is left untreated. Allergic conjunctivitis can be seasonal or year round depending on the severity of one’s allergies.

What are the symptoms?

The most common pink eye symptoms are:
- Redness in one or both eyes
- Itchiness in one or both eyes
- Gritty feeling in one or both eyes
- A discharge in one or both eyes that forms a crust overnight and may prevent the eye from opening
- Tearing

It can be difficult to determine what type of conjunctivitis is present by symptoms alone so anytime the eye is red or irritated the eye doctor should be called to schedule an eye exam.

What are the available treatments?

Treatment will depend on the type of conjunctivitis whether it is viral, bacteria, or allergic. With viral conjunctivitis, there is little a doctor can do and it must run its course over a few days. A cold wet compress can help relieve symptoms. With bacterial conjunctivitis, a doctor can prescribe antibiotic eye drops or ointments. With allergic conjunctivitis, allergy medication can be taken to relieve symptoms.

What are the functional implications?

If you suspect an individual is affected, make an appointment with the eye doctor or send them to the school nurse and use the following precautions to help prevent the spread of viral conjunctivitis:
- Wash hands frequently
- Avoid rubbing or touching eyes and don’t touch an uninfected eye with a hand that has touched an infected eye
- Do not share items touched by a person with conjunctivitis
- Cover your nose and mouth when coughing or sneezing
- Clean surfaces, bathrooms and faucet handles
- Wash pillowcases, sheets, washcloths and towels in hot water

If an individual is affected, tell his or her teacher about the infection so extra steps can be taken to sanitize the classroom or day care center. Also, the individual should stay home until the contagious stage has passed. The doctor will release the individual back to school or work usually about three to five days after the diagnosis. Their vision should not be affected once they return to school or work.

References:


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