

Viral conjunctivitis

This Eye Casualty advice sheet explains what viral conjunctivitis is and how it is managed. If you have any queries, please speak to your doctor or nurse.

What is viral conjunctivitis?

Viral conjunctivitis is a common, self-limiting eye condition caused by a virus.

Signs and symptoms

Your eye may be red, sore, itchy and watery. Viral conjunctivitis can take many weeks to resolve even when you follow all the correct treatment advice. In most cases, vision is not affected although some people's vision may appear blurry and/or sensitive to light. This is due to an inflammatory reaction that affects the cornea. This usually resolves with time, but it can take several weeks or even months.

Bacterial conjunctivitis (caused by bacteria) is more likely to cause a red eye with a sticky, thick yellow discharge.

What is the treatment?

There is no medication for viral conjunctivitis and it does not respond to antibiotic drops, as it is not caused by bacteria. The recommended treatment for viral conjunctivitis is to use chilled artificial tears, cold compresses, regular lid hygiene and simple painkillers. Symptoms will eventually resolve when your body becomes immune to the virus and fights off the germs, just as it would with a cold or 'flu.

On very rare occasions, steroid drops maybe given for severe cases of viral conjunctivitis, or when the cornea is affected. Steroid drops are not recommended for all cases of viral conjunctivitis.

Antibiotic drops can be helpful in cases of bacterial conjunctivitis and are often prescribed for a one or two-week course but antibiotics will not work on viral conjunctivitis.

Prevention

Conjunctivitis is highly contagious and spreads easily by water droplets (coughing, sneezing) or contact with tissues, towels, pillowcases, shaking hands and so on. Because of this, it is really important to wash your hands frequently, not share towels at home and to dispose of tissues after use to prevent family members or work colleagues from developing the condition.

It is also very important that you do not wear your contact lenses when you have any kind of eye infection.

Contacting us

If you have a minor eye problem, please seek advice from your GP, optician or pharmacist. If urgent, please attend Eye Casualty or call 111.

Eye Casualty (Reading):	Mon-Fri 9am to 5pm; Sat & Sun & bank holidays 9am-12.30pm; Closed Christmas Day and New Year's Day.
Eye Casualty: Prince Charles Eye Unit (Windsor):	Mon-Fri 9am to 5pm; Sat 9am-12.30pm; Closed Sun & bank holidays.
Dorrell Ward (Reading):	0118 322 7172 (24 hours a day)
Eye Day Unit (Reading):	0118 322 7123 (Mon-Fri 7am to 6pm)

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Please ask if you need this information in another language or format.

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