

Pink Eye: Knowing the Facts

I often get questions regarding the use of antibacterial eye drops for the treatment of pink eye. What a lot of people do not know is that conjunctivitis, better known as pink eye can be caused by a variety of different things. This common disorder of the eye is caused by swelling or infection of the membrane that lines the eyelid and part of the eyeball. Although pink eye can be irritating it seldom affects vision. Through this article I would like to look at the different causes of pink eye, symptoms, and treatment.

The most common symptoms of pink eye include redness, tearing, itchiness, and a gritty feeling in either one or both eyes. There is often a discharge from the affected eye(s) that forms a crust overnight. It is important to know that certain types of pink eye can be very contagious lasting upwards of two weeks after the signs and symptoms begin. Early diagnosis and treatment will not only reduce the irritation, but also limit its spread to others.

As I have previously mentioned pink eye, or conjunctivitis, has a variety of causes. Some of these include bacteria, viruses, allergies, or foreign debris in the eye. Viral and bacterial conjunctivitis can affect either one or both eyes. The difference between the two is that viral conjunctivitis often has a clear, watery discharge from the eye, whereas bacterial conjunctivitis has a thicker, yellow/green discharge. Viral conjunctivitis also tends to begin in one eye then infect the other in a couple days. We often see cases of bacterial or viral conjunctivitis at the same time as colds or other respiratory tract infections. It is these two types of pink eye that can be highly contagious. Allergic conjunctivitis on the other hand affects both eyes and is the body's response to a substance like pollen or dust. This type of pink eye typically causes extreme itching and tearing of the eyes, along with sneezing and watery nasal discharge. Finally, another type of conjunctivitis is due to foreign debris in the eye, such as sand or wood. Most often flushing and cleaning the eye will help get rid of the object, with the symptoms of watery eyes and mucous discharge clearing up on their own within approximately one day.

Because there are different causes of pink eye it is important to have understanding of how to treat each type. If the infection is caused by bacteria the necessary treatment is an antibacterial eye drop. One option would be Polysporin® eye drops available at your local pharmacy. Once treatment is started symptoms often begin to go away within 2 to 3 days. This is in contrast to viral conjunctivitis for which most cases do not have a treatment option. Instead the virus has to run its course and go away on its own, usually within approximately two or three weeks. Finally allergic conjunctivitis is best managed with antihistamine eye drops or oral medications, some of which can be found over-the-counter at your pharmacy. It is important to know that regardless of the cause, if you wear contact lenses you should stop using them until your eye symptoms have improved.

If you are experiencing any eye pain, change in vision, or have an object trapped in your eye, you should seek medical attention as soon as possible. You should also see your physician if after 48 hours of treating pink eye at home you do not see any improvement, or if symptoms worsen. Finally all children, especially those under the age of 2 should seek medical attention prior to initiating therapy for a suspected case of pink eye.

With bacterial and viral conjunctivitis being highly contagious there are certain things you can do to prevent its spread to others. Some of these include; washing your hands as often as possible, trying to avoid touching your eyes with your hands, using a clean towel and washcloth every day, and finally throwing away any used eye cosmetics, such as mascara.

Pink eye is a common disorder that is caused by a number of different things. Knowing the signs and symptoms of each type is important in deciding the appropriate treatment option. If you have any questions be sure to speak to your physician or pharmacist. Remember, your health is our number one priority!

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