

# Conjunctivitis (pink eye)

## Description

Conjunctivitis is a swelling or infection of the clear membrane that covers the white part of the eye and the inner surface of the eyelid (conjunctiva). It may cause redness, swelling, itchiness, pain and sometimes a sticky discharge.

It can be caused by a bacterial or viral infection, chemical irritation, sun or an allergy.

It is often difficult to diagnose between *viral* and *bacterial* conjunctivitis. Children are more likely to be affected by bacterial conjunctivitis.

## How does it spread?

Viral and bacterial conjunctivitis can spread very quickly among groups of children in early childhood centres. The infection spreads through direct contact with discharge from an infected eye or contaminated items, such as towels or toys. Coughs and sneezes may also spread the infection.

## Infectious period

While there is discharge from the eye the child is contagious. In cases of viral conjunctivitis the infectious period usually begins prior to the appearance of symptoms.

Infected conjunctivitis presents a significant risk of infection to others and can also be very uncomfortable for the child.

Conjunctivitis caused by allergies or other irritants is not contagious.

## Exclusion period

Children should not attend the centre until they are symptom free and the eye is no longer pink.

**Rationale:** Antibiotics may be prescribed despite the difficulty in distinguishing between viral and bacterial conjunctivitis. The symptom free period allows for the possibility that the infection is caused by a virus where the antibiotics are less effective.

## Responsibilities of Early Childhood Education Service

- Tell parents that a child at the centre has conjunctivitis.
- Display information about conjunctivitis prominently at your centre and provide each family with a copy of this factsheet.
- Make sure staff and children's hands are washed often with soap and warm water, and are thoroughly dried, particularly infants.
- Clean all toys and surfaces with detergent, and then disinfect by wiping with or soaking in a diluted bleach solution. Disinfecting toys and general surfaces such as tables is a precaution for outbreaks, not a 'normal' procedure. When you don't have an outbreak, frequent washing with detergent is okay.

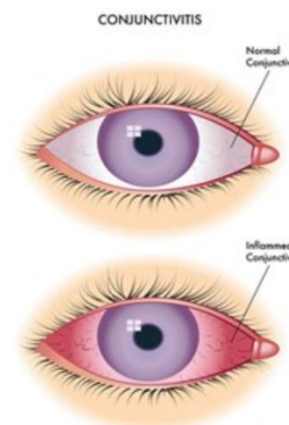


Image:  
<https://www.healthnavigator.org.nz/health-a-z/c/conjunctivitis/>

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Make up a new bleach solution daily. Check on your bottle of bleach for the percentage of sodium hypochlorite, and make up as per table below.

Strength of bottle	Bleach (ml)	Water (ml)	Total (ml)
1%	100	900	1000
2%	50	950	1000
3%	33	967	1000
4%	25	975	1000
5%	20	980	1000

- Keep all bed linen, towels and face cloths separate for each child and launder regularly.

## Responsibilities of parents

- Keep your child home until they are symptom free and the eye is no longer pink.

## Treatment

Conjunctivitis will often get better by itself. Antibiotics may speed up recovery time but this may only be by half a day.

*Viral* conjunctivitis requires no treatment; a cool compress may help to soothe the irritation.

*Bacterial* conjunctivitis can be treated with antibiotic drops or ointment.

## References/resources

- <https://www.healthnavigator.org.nz/health-a-z/c/conjunctivitis/>
- <https://www.healthnavigator.org.nz/health-a-z/a/allergic-conjunctivitis/>