

Diseases Fact Sheet - Conjunctivitis

South Dakota Department of Health

Office of Disease Prevention Services - 605-773-3737 -(1-800-592-1861 in South Dakota only)

This material is provided for informational purposes only and is not a substitute for medical care. We are not able to answer personal medical questions. Please see your health care provider concerning appropriate care, treatment or other medical advice.

What is it?

Conjunctivitis is a painful, itchy inflammation of the eyes and eyelids.

What causes conjunctivitis?

Infectious conjunctivitis can be caused by several different bacteria and viruses. Haemophilus, Streptococcus, and Staphylococcus are the most common bacterial causes; and adenoviruses are the most common viral agents. Clinically, bacterial and viral conjunctivitis are similar.

Who gets conjunctivitis?

Children under 5 are most often affected. Older children and adults may also get conjunctivitis, but less frequently.

How is this infection spread?

It is spread by contact with discharges of the eyes or respiratory tract of infected people, from contaminated fingers, clothing and other articles, including shared eye makeup applicators, and eyedroppers.

What are the symptoms of conjunctivitis?

Symptoms include white or yellowish discharge from one or both eyes, tears, pain, swelling and reddening of the eyelids, matted eyelids after sleep, and sensitivity to light. In severe cases, infiltration of the cornea may occur. The illness may last from 2 days to 2-3 weeks.

How soon after exposure do symptoms appear?

Symptoms usually appear 24 to 72 hours after exposure for bacterial conjunctivitis; and 5-12 days for viral conjunctivitis.

For how long can an infected person transmit conjunctivitis?

Conjunctivitis can be transmitted as long as there is active infection in the eyes.



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How is it diagnosed?

Conjunctivitis is diagnosed through clinical examination, microscopic examination, bacterial culture, or viral culture.

What is the treatment for conjunctivitis?

Most types of mild bacterial or viral conjunctivitis are usually self-limited and probably don't require treatment. A medical provider may recommend eye ointment or drops containing antibiotics for treating severe bacterial conjunctivitis. Treatment for viral conjunctivitis is generally ineffective.

Should individuals with conjunctivitis be kept out of work or school?

No exclusions are recommended, unless the child has a fever or is not healthy enough to participate in routine activities.

What precautions should the infected person follow?

Infected persons should practice good personal hygiene, especially hand-washing before and after touching the eyes; and proper disposal of articles soiled with eye or respiratory secretions.