

For Your Health

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Viral Conjunctivitis

Probably the most common infection seen in the eye doctor's office is a viral infection of the conjunctiva. The conjunctiva is the clear lining that covers the surface of the white part of the eye. Sometimes this infection is described as a "cold" in the eye.

Dozens of viruses can cause this type of infection. Sometimes only the eye is infected; at other times the eye condition is part of a more generalized problem, such as the "flu" or a cold.

Both eyes are usually involved, although perhaps not at the same time. Usually, symptoms are mild and not serious. Infrequently, however, the eye complaints are incapacitating and extremely bothersome. Symptoms of viral conjunctivitis include a wide spectrum of complaints: tearing, redness, swelling of the conjunctiva, and a clear discharge are characteristic. Light sensitivity can also be a prominent symptom. Sometimes a lymph node on the cheek in front of the ear swells in response to the virus. (An important clue that the patient has viral, not bacterial conjunctivitis.)

If there is involvement in the cornea (the clear front window of the eye), blurred vision may result. Fortunately, this blurriness resolves over a few days to weeks and rarely leaves permanent scars.

Occasionally the lids become swollen and the patient experiences serious ocular pain, and very rarely there is bleeding into the lids.

Treatment is aimed at making the patient comfortable during the first few days. Cool compresses soothe the eyes and lids, pain relievers help with the discomfort, and occasionally eye drops will help; but the real treatment is time and rest. If the blurred vision is significant, driving and work activities should be done only with great caution and care. Cortisone eye drops are sometimes of great assistance in controlling the symptoms of this infection.

Since this disease is very contagious, prevention of spread is very important. The incubation period for viral conjunctivitis is only one or two days, making rapid spread very easy. In the office, hand washing is critical if we are to avoid spreading the germ to other patients. Direct contact with the infected eye should be avoided. Indirect contact through hand towels, washcloths, and clothing should be carefully eliminated.

Just as with a cold, patients may be miserable for a few days; but with time, our defense systems overcome the infection. Complete resolution is to be expected in almost all patients. Only rarely do symptoms persist causing scarring and blurred vision.



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