

AHRQ Safety Program for Telemedicine: Improving Antibiotic Use

Conjunctivitis – Clinician Guide¹⁻⁴

Diagnosis

Conjunctivitis, commonly known as "pink eye," is inflammation of the conjunctiva, the thin membrane covering the white part of the eyeball and the inside of the eyelids. Viral conjunctivitis generally is associated with upper respiratory symptoms, watery discharge, and a more gradual onset. It is sometimes caused by adenovirus, which is highly contagious and spreads through respiratory droplets or direct contact.

Bacterial conjunctivitis generally presents with purulent discharge and is more pronounced in the morning. It typically involves one eye, but can spread to both eyes. Bacterial conjunctivitis is most commonly caused by *Streptococcus pneumoniae*, *Haemophilus influenzae*, and *Staphylococcus aureus*.

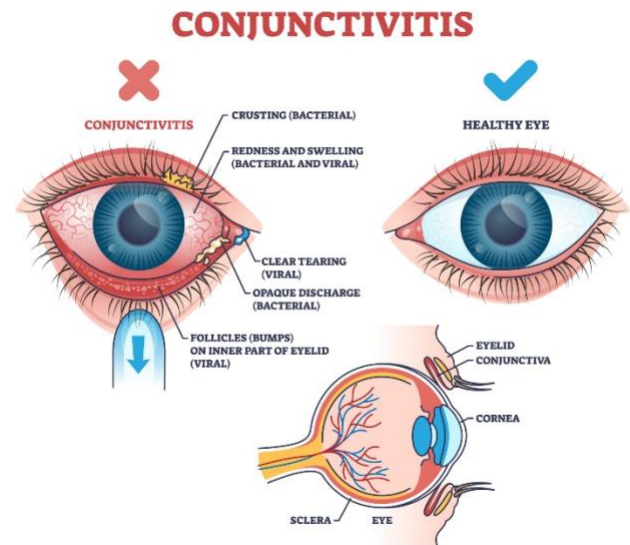
Other causes of conjunctivitis include allergic conjunctivitis which generally presents as a bilateral, intense itching, watery discharge, and is often seasonal. Allergic conjunctivitis, commonly caused by pollen, dust, or pet dander, is generally associated with other allergic symptoms like rhinitis. Allergic conjunctivitis is often associated with asthma and/or eczema.

Treatment

- Viral conjunctivitis: self-limited, supportive care with cold compresses and artificial tears. Antibiotics do not improve symptoms. Advise patients to avoid close contact and maintain proper hand hygiene. Typically resolves within 1-2 weeks.
- Bacterial conjunctivitis: Treat with eye drops such as fluoroquinolone drops for 5-7 days. Remind patients to avoid touching eyes and sharing personal items.
- Allergic conjunctivitis: Oral antihistamines (e.g., loratadine, cetirizine) and/or topical antihistamines.

Followup

- Refer patients to an ophthalmologist or emergency room if concerns for: severe pain or photophobia, visual changes, recurrent or persistent symptoms despite treatment.
- Prevention of future episodes of conjunctivitis is generally dependent on good hand hygiene, avoiding sharing personal items like towels or makeup, and proper cleaning of contact lenses.



References

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