

"Pink Eye" not as epidemic now but still contagious among children

Many people of vintage age -- maybe not so vintage -- remember having "pink eye" as kids. It was a common occurrence in summer. The eyes turned red as a beet, mattered continually -- especially during sleep, and seemingly always attracted swarming gnats.

"Pink eye" was epidemic nearly every summer. One family member would become infected, then the rest. Being highly contagious, "pink eye" sometimes ran through the whole communities. Of course, part of the reason for the seasonal outbreak was that sanitary conditions, as a rule, left a lot to be desired. One wash towel, one bar of soap, two or three to a bed -- close contact -- almost always assured its spread.

Now, things are different, environmentally, and "pink eye" is not as apt to become epidemic. But, according to Dr. Donald Moore, a Coats family physician, it is still a common infection and does occur, but mostly as a result of close contact among children.

Dr. Moore explained that "pink eye" is a viral form of conjunctivitis. Another form is caused by bacteria which usually results from infection caused by injury to the eyes -- foreign substances, swimming in contaminated water, allergic reactions to pollen, chemical burns, among others.

Dr. Moore said conjunctivitis is so named because the conjunctiva, the inside of the eyelid and part of the surface of the eye, is infected. Symptoms of the infection are redness (bloodshot eyeballs and red rims), swelling (puffy eyelids like that caused by lack of sleep, crying, etc.), tearing (as if you'd been chopping onions), and secretion (similar to what may occur in the corners of the eyes some mornings, only much worse).

He pointed out that the bacterial form of conjunctivitis can occur anytime during the year, but is most common in summer due to dust and pollens. Specific symptoms are itchiness, redness and sometimes inflammation. Bacterial conjunctivitis usually starts as a simple infection.

The family physician said initial treatment consists of warm compresses, and a simple antiseptic such as a diluted boric acid eyewash -- plus an antihistamine if the condition stems from an allergy. "Sometimes treatment may call for a topical antibiotic. If the infection is severe enough, he said a systemic antibiotic, one taken internally, may be prescribed.

Of course, viral conjunctivitis does not respond to antibiotics. Dr. Moore said "pink eye" treatment most often consists of little else other than a boric acid eyewash and warm compresses. He said care should be taken to wash the eye from the inside corner out to make sure the tear ducts do not become infected.

Its spread can, however, be limited if care is taken by the person who has it. A person with "pink eye" should not go swimming in a pool. Others can get it from the water. Don't use anybody else's washcloth or towel. Hands should be washed every time they come in contact with eyes, else the germs will be left on everything touched. Remember, it spreads like crazy. To sum up, Dr. Moore suggested that it is well to remember that conjunctivitis, the "pink eye"

type, is highly contagious and makes the eyes tear, get red and swollen. And there will usually be gooe discharge. It is a simple infection that can be treated suc-

cessfully with a boric acid eyewash and warm compresses. The bacterial type of conjunctivitis, that is caused by pollen or injury of some kind, can be

treated with an eyewash, a topical antibiotic, or systemic antibiotic if the infection is serious enough.

Dr. Moore cautioned that conjunctivitis, whatever its cause,

can be serious, especially when caused by injury to the eyes. Red, swollen eyes with a discharge, usually indicate conjunctivitis and should be diagnos-

ed by a physician. Don't take chances with your eyes.

(This column is a service of the North Carolina Academy of Family Physicians.)

4th Of July


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