

QUESTION OF THE WEEK

What is pink eye and is it contagious?

**Dr. Eric W. Jones**

Guest Columnist

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In order to answer your question, it's important to have a good understanding of what pink eye, or conjunctivitis, really is. Conjunctivitis is inflammation of the membrane covering the inner eyelid and most of the eyeball. This inflammation causes the normally clear membrane to turn red, usually with some type of discharge. The type (or absence) of discharge helps doctors determine which kind of pink eye your child has.

Most doctors divide pink eye into two groups: infectious and non-infectious. Infectious pink eye can be caused by several different bacteria (similar to those involved in ear and sinus infections) or by several different types of viruses; all of these are highly contagious, and spread very quickly through homes, schools, and daycares.

The majority of cases of infectious conjunctivitis are caused by the same viruses that cause the common cold, and like the common cold go away without treatment. Viral pink eye usually involves redness of both eyes, although it can be one-sided, and has crusting with clear or slightly cloudy discharge throughout the day. Often, kids say their eyes are scratchy or "sandy" and usually they have cold symptoms, such as stuffy or runny nose, cough, and fever. Bacteri-

See QUESTION, Page 5D



Bacterial pink eye typically involves one eye, with yellow-green discharge that usually worsens through the course of the day. GETTY IMAGES/ISTOCKPHOTO

Question

Continued from Page 1D

al pink eye, on the other hand, typically involves one eye, with yellow-green discharge that usually worsens through the course of the day.

The non-infectious types of pink eye are caused by allergies or irritants, and these types are not contagious. Usually, there is less discharge with these types and if there is discharge it remains clear. Often, patients complain their eyes are itchy and swollen; they may also have other symptoms of an allergy flare, such as clear runny nose or an itchy throat.

Treatment depends on making an accurate diagnosis: bacterial pink eye is best treated with antibiotic drops, while viral conjunctivitis goes away without treatment. Allergic disease can be treated with prescription eye drops or over the counter allergy medications. It's important to visit your pediatrician, though, because as many as 30 percent of bacterial eye infections can be associated with ear infections, which require meds by mouth for a cure. Other causes of red eyes must also be ruled out.

Dr. Eric W. Jones is a board certified pediatrician with Physicians' Primary Care of Southwest Florida in the Cape Coral office at 1261 Viscaya Parkway, Suite 101 (239-573-7337) and in the Lehigh Acres office at 5700 Lee Boulevard (239-481-5437).