

Erythromycin Eye Ointment for Newborn Pinkeye (Conjunctivitis)

By: Robert W. Frenck, Jr, MD, FAAP

The first few hours of your baby's life are a time for cuddling and closeness. They're also the time when your birth team will perform tests and treatments to protect your child's health. One treatment all newborns get is an antibiotic eye ointment called erythromycin.

In most states, hospitals and birth centers are required to treat a newborn's eyes with the ointment to prevent newborn pinkeye (also called ophthalmia neonatorum (<https://www.cdc.gov/conjunctivitis/newborns/index.html>) or newborn conjunctivitis). This infection can cause vision problems or blindness if it's not treated.



Here's what to know about newborn pinkeye and erythromycin ointment.

How does a new baby get pinkeye?

Newborn conjunctivitis has many possible causes, including infection, allergy and eye irritation. An infection from bacteria or viruses can pass to the baby during pregnancy or in the birth canal.

Pinkeye from gonorrhea (gonococcal conjunctivitis)

Erythromycin ointment prevents a pinkeye infection from gonorrhea (<https://www.cdc.gov/gonorrhea/about/>), a disease that spreads between sexual partners. The ointment is applied onto your newborn's eyes shortly after birth to prevent infection. If it's not treated, this type of pinkeye can damage the clear covering of your baby's eyes (the cornea). Pinkeye from gonorrhea can also cause a life-threatening bloodstream infection, meningitis ([/English/health-issues/conditions/head-neck-nervous-system/Pages/Meningitis.aspx](#)) (swelling of the tissues that cover the brain and spinal cord).

Symptoms of newborn pinkeye

A new baby with a pinkeye infection (<https://www.cdc.gov/conjunctivitis/newborns/index.html>) may have symptoms such as:

- Red eyes
- Swollen eyelids
- Thick, pus-like discharge

Watch for signs of pinkeye even if your baby was treated with eye ointment. A newborn with symptoms of pinkeye should be seen by a doctor right away.

Other ways to prevent infection

[Back to Top](#)

Erythromycin only prevents newborn pinkeye infections from gonorrhea. Other germs cause pinkeye in new babies, like chlamydia ([/English/health-issues/conditions/chest-lungs/Pages/Chlamydia-pneumoniae-Infections.aspx](#)), staph, strep, E coli ([/English/health-issues/conditions/infections/Pages/E-Coli-Infection-Not-Just-From-Food.aspx](#)), herpes simplex ([/English/health-issues/conditions/skin/Pages/Herpes-Simplex-Virus-Cold-Sores.aspx](#)) and *H. influenzae*.

If you are pregnant, ask your doctor about screening for gonorrhea, chlamydia (<https://www.cdc.gov/sti/testing/next-steps-after-testing-positive-for-gonorrhea-or-chlamydia.html>) and other infections ([/English/ages-stages/prenatal/Pages/Simple-Steps-to-Prevent-Infections-During-Pregnancy.aspx](#)) that can cause problems for your baby. That way you can get treated before your baby is born. If you were not screened while pregnant, get tested during labor or delivery.

And remember to get vaccines during pregnancy ([/English/ages-stages/prenatal/Pages/vaccines-during-pregnancy-keeping-you-and-your-baby-healthy.aspx](#)). The baby gets antibodies (immune protection) that your body creates from vaccines during pregnancy. It's a great way for both of you to stay healthy.

More information

- [Bringing Baby Home: What to Do Before Leaving the Hospital \(/English/ages-stages/prenatal/delivery-beyond/Pages/bringing-baby-home-what-to-do-before-leaving-the-hospital.aspx\)](#)
- [Steps to Prevent Infections During Pregnancy \(/English/ages-stages/prenatal/Pages/Simple-Steps-to-Prevent-Infections-During-Pregnancy.aspx\)](#)
- [Sexually Transmitted Infections: Why Testing is Important \(/English/health-issues/conditions/sexually-transmitted/Pages/Diagnostic-Testing-for-Sexually-Transmitted-Infections.aspx\)](#)
- [Cytomegalovirus \(CMV\) Infections: What Parents Need to Know \(/English/health-issues/conditions/infections/Pages/Cytomegalovirus-CMV-Infections.aspx\)](#)
- [Your baby's first hour: getting to know each other \(/English/ages-stages/prenatal/delivery-beyond/Pages/Bonding-With-Your-Baby.aspx\)](#)
- [Eye Problems in Children & How They're Treated \(/English/health-issues/conditions/eyes/Pages/Specific-Eye-Problems.aspx\)](#)

About Dr. Frenc



Robert W. Frenc, Jr., MD, FAAP, is board-certified in general pediatrics and pediatric infectious diseases. He practices at Cincinnati Children's Hospital Medical Center and is a Professor in the Department of Pediatrics at the University of Cincinnati School of Medicine in Cincinnati, Ohio. Within the American Academy of Pediatrics, Dr. Frenc is a member of both the Section on Uniformed Services (SOUS) and the Section on Infectious Diseases (SOID).

Last Updated 3/19/2025

Source American Academy of Pediatrics (Copyright © 2025)

The information contained on this Web site should not be used as a substitute for the medical care and advice of your pediatrician. There may be variations in treatment that your pediatrician may recommend based on individual facts and circumstances.