

Pinkeye

What goes around, comes around

by Glen Herbert

In September of 2007, just as school was resuming after the summer break, there was an outbreak among students in Korea so extensive that it caused class cancellations, school closures, and made the international news. Within a week or so, in excess of 20 000 students were infected and they then spread it to family members and beyond.

The infection—wait for it—was pinkeye. If you've been around kids for any length of time, you've probably had it or at least have heard of it, even if you've never been anywhere near Korea. To say it's common is an understatement. It especially loves kids because they are so good at spreading it amongst themselves; pinkeye can make it around the playground, or the summer camp, or wherever kids gather, faster than a rumour. One day the kids can look fresh-faced and well scrubbed, then next like a little support group of substance abusers clambering for their sunglasses.

What it is

Known in the medical community conjunctivitis, the more common name calls it pretty nearly exactly what it is: pink or bloodshot eyes. There is often a discharge as well, and at times so prolific as to effectively glue eyelids shut, which can be a bit disorienting when waking up from a nap. Bacterial and viral causes are equally common, though the most galling—and the one which is going to require attention—is the bacterial form.

But if there is anything really interesting about pinkeye, it is how quickly it can spread. That outbreak in Korea went from a few thousand cases on August 28th of the year, to tens of thousands by September 7, a little more than a week later. Truly, it is one of the most contagious things that you are likely to experience (fingers crossed).

How to get it

Pinkeye is communicated through physical contact with the gunky discharge. Kids wipe their eyes, touch things, and the bacteria make their way in the world. Kids can also pick it up via shared toys, towels, and clothing. If your kids get it, chances are good you will get it, too. It's just that hard to avoid.

How to get rid of it

As an ailment, however, it's generally fairly mild, and even the worst cases can be cleared up in a matter of days with the right course of treatment. Some forms, such as those associated with allergies or viral infection will generally clear up on their own in a few days. With the bacterial form you may likely prefer a more expeditious cure. Doctors can prescribe antibiotic eye drops or ointment, though the drops are often preferred.

Even as communicable as pinkeye is, it doesn't have to be a foregone conclusion. Encourage your children not to share towels, to wash their hands frequently throughout the day, and to not touch their eyes. If you do the same, you will have a fighting chance of keeping the outbreaks to a minimum.

A bigger question for many is how long should a child stay home from school. Once a treatment is begun, the symptoms will abate quite quickly. The rule of thumb is to keep a child home for 24 hours since the beginning of the treatment.

Giving Eye Drops to Kids

Kids generally don't like eye drops, of course, so this may take some doing. One strategy is to have the child close her eyes, place a drop in the corner of the eye nearest the nose, and then blink the drop in.

Apollo 11 Disease

One of the more serious forms of pinkeye, acute hemorrhagic conjunctivitis, was unknown before 1969 when it first appeared in Ghana and then quickly spread around the world. Because it was first described at the time of the first moon landing, it became known as the Apollo 11 disease. In Ghana, to this day it is known commonly as "apollo."

It's Catching!

Along with good grades and valentines, here are some other the things your child may be bringing home from the day care or school this year:

- **Croup/laryngitis** In kids less than 5, it's called croup, in those older, its laryngitis.
- **Fever** There are many things that can cause fever, some of which the spike in temperature is the only symptom.
- **Flu** We've all had it, and we'll all certainly get it again. The flu shot is a great way to control frequency and severity.
- **Strep throat** Can cause fever and stomachache along with a very sore throat
- **Stomach flu** Cramps, vomiting, diarrhea, fever, loss of appetite ... the full deal. While we call it the flu, more often its not at all related to the flu. Rather, it could be any number of gastro intestinal illnesses that tend to go around.

All of these things are communicated through physical contact, sneezes and coughs, and via surfaces, and therefore your line of defense remains the same for all: handwashing, general hygiene, covering your mouth when you sneeze or cough, and not touching your eyes.