



Newborn Prophylactic Eye Treatment (Erythromycin Ophthalmic Ointment)

What can cause newborn eye infection?

Eye infections in the newborn can be acquired during a vaginal delivery, and are most often caused by sexually transmitted infections (specifically chlamydia and gonorrhea). Chlamydia is currently the most common cause of newborn eye infection in North America. The newborn eye infection rate from an untreated infected mother is 23-70%. Complications from gonorrhea infection are more severe, appear more rapidly, and are more likely to cause blindness than infections caused by other bacteria. The newborn eye infection rate from an untreated infected mother is 30-50%.

Both chlamydia and gonorrhea infections can occur in adults without any obvious signs or symptoms: 50% of males are asymptomatic for both Chlamydia and gonorrhea, 70% of females are asymptomatic for Chlamydia and greater than 50% are asymptomatic for gonorrhea. From a public health perspective, because many women do not know they are infected and the effects of infection on the newborn are so great, treating the baby's eyes with medicine to prevent infection makes sense. This is prophylaxis.

Risk factors for newborn eye infection include:

- premature rupture of membranes
- documented or suspected sexually transmitted disease
- local eye injury during birth.

Minimizing eye infections in the newborn

Prenatal screening and treatment of the mother (and her sexual partners) for chlamydia and gonorrhea and administration of newborn eye prophylaxis have had a major impact on the prevention of neonatal eye infections. Erythromycin eye ointment is the type of antibiotic treatment recommended as the standard of care to prevent potential harm to the newborn's eyes (including blindness). Antibiotic eye prophylaxis in the presence of potentially harmful bacteria does significantly reduce the risk of transmission, but does not eliminate it completely.

Limiting your newborn's exposure to potentially harmful bacteria is a primary goal of your midwives. We touch your newborn as little and as gently as possible, try to avoid invasive procedures, and advise that you limit your newborn's exposure to people who do not live in your home. We ask that you keep us promptly apprised of any symptoms of infection in yourself or your newborn. Minor eye irritations (such as plugged tear ducts) are not causes of blindness and are not affected by the use or disuse of erythromycin.

Possible side effects include:

- local irritation and inflammation
- overuse of antibiotics which can produce antibiotic resistant organisms
- the ointment temporarily blurs the infant's vision and may interfere with bonding.

By selecting and initialing your options on the Informed Choice Checklist for this document you agree that:

I have read and understand this information, and have had the opportunity to do my own research. I understand the risks and benefits of treatment, and know that I can change my mind and request a different course of treatment at the time of my baby's birth. I choose the following (please note your selections here for your own records to match those in your midwives' chart);

_____ I choose antibiotic eye ointment for my newborn

_____ I decline antibiotic eye ointment for my newborn