CONJUNCTIVITIS

What is it?
Conjunctivitis is an inflammation of the thin, clear membrane (conjunctiva) that covers the white of the eye and inside the eyelid. It can be caused by bacteria or viruses. Generally it is not a serious condition.

How do I know if someone has it?
The eye(s) usually look pink and may have a discharge, which may be watery, or thick with mucus and pus causing the eyelids to stick together. The person often complains of gritty, sticky eye(s), especially in the morning. The eyelids are swollen and tender. Infection may begin in only one eye but usually spreads to both. Viral conjunctivitis is normally characterised by sudden onset of pain or the feeling of dust in the eye. The eyelids are swollen and tender.

Is it infectious?
Conjunctivitis is spread from person to person by direct contact with infected discharge from the eyes, in droplets coughed or sneezed into the air, or on hands, towels and washcloths. Outbreaks are therefore more common in younger children e.g. in nursery settings. Conjunctivitis is infectious as long as symptoms are present.

What is the incubation period?
Symptoms usually appear 12 hours to 3 days after contact with an infected person.

Is there any treatment?
Yes, prescribed eye ointment or drops containing antibiotics applied to the affected eye(s) works well for bacterial conjunctivitis. First wipe away any discharge with damp cotton wool. Warn older children that the medicine might sting for a few moments. Then gently pull the lower lid down and place one drop (or 1/4 inch of ointment) into the space this forms. If possible ask the child to look up while you put in the medication. Avoid touching the dropper or tube on the eye. Another way to give eyedrops is to have your child lie face up with both eyes closed. Place one drop on the inner corner of the each eye and then gently pull the lids apart or tell the child to blink. The drops will run into the eye themselves. There is no specific treatment for viral conjunctivitis, but bathing the eyes may be soothing.

What should I do if someone has the illness?
- See a doctor.
- Wash hands before, between and after touching eyes.
- Discourage rubbing of the eye(s).
- Use separate bits of damp cotton wool to gently clean each eye as often as necessary, and throw away after use.
- Apply any eye ointment or drops as prescribed and throw the ointment / drops away after the treatment is finished. Never share the treatment and never keep used bottles / tubes.
- Do not share flannels, eye makeup applicators etc.

How soon can someone return to school or work?
A person should stay away until the eye is treated or appears normal again.