

Allergic Eye Disease in Children

(Allergic conjunctivitis, vernal keratoconjunctivitis (VKC), atopic keratoconjunctivitis (AKC))

Ophthalmology Department Patient Information

What is it?

Vernal keratoconjunctivitis (VKC) and atopic keratoconjunctivitis (AKC) are eye diseases caused by allergies. We call this allergic eye disease. It is like eczema, but it affects the eyes instead of the skin.

It can make the eyes sore, itchy, red and sometimes blurry. It can affect the clear window (cornea) at the front of the eye. This can cause your child to be sensitive to light. They may not be able to open their eyes properly. It can also lead to permanent scarring. This can cause sight loss.

Like eczema, it can last for many years. Most young people do eventually grow out of it. It can happen at any age, but teenage boys get it the most.

What causes it?

It is caused by the immune system.

The immune system can overreact to harmless things like dust or pollen. This can cause problems with breathing like asthma. It can cause problems with the skin like eczema. It can also cause problems with the eyes. We call this allergic eye disease.

It is more common if other people in your family have allergies.

Allergy tests usually don't help much. People with these allergies react to many things in the environment. It's not always useful to know exactly what causes the allergy. This is the same for asthma or eczema.

How is it treated?

At the hospital appointment, your child may be prescribed eye drops. These are usually anti-allergy eye drops (Opatanol, Ketotifen). They should be used twice a day. Don't stop using them unless the doctor says it is okay, even if they are feeling better. The problem can come back if you stop the drops too early. Some children only need eye drops in hot weather or during allergy season. Others need them all year. Your child may also get antihistamine medicine like Cetirizine or Fexofenadine.

It's important to stop your child from rubbing or scratching their eyes. This can make the problem worse. If your child's eyes get worse quickly, put a cold cloth on their eyelids. This can help for a little while.

Sometimes, the doctor might give stronger eyedrops like steroids. This would be if your child's eyes are very inflamed or the window of the eye (the cornea) is affected. These can help the eyes feel better quickly, but they should only be used exactly as the doctor says. This is because they can have side effects.

For bad cases, other treatments might include:

- Ciclosporin (Verkazia, Ikervis) eyedrops. These might be used to replace steroid eye drops.
- Protopic ointment. This can help with very bad allergic eye disease.

It is very important you do not stop the medication until your consultant tells you to. You must get more medicine and eyedrops from your GP between visits and it is important not to run out.

What happens next?

Your child may need regular eye check-ups with the doctor. It's important to go to these appointments. You should follow the doctor's instructions on taking the medicine. If the disease is very serious, it can cause permanent eye damage. This can be avoided with proper treatment.

Please let us know if your child is struggling between appointments. They should be comfortable in their daily life. We may need to see them sooner if this is not the case.

What to look out for:

- Painful eyes
- Redness, swelling and itching which is getting a lot worse
- Vision getting worse over time
- Sensitivity to light
- Not able to open the eye fully

Contact Information:

Having trouble getting the medication? Are your child's eyes getting worse despite treatment? If it is an emergency, you can call the Eye Emergency triage line: **0300 019 1515**

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