

Relieving red eye

In cattle the term “pink eye” refers to a specific bacterial infection known as IBK (infectious bovine keratoconjunctivitis).

It’s a painful, distressing condition that can severely affect animal productivity. When both eyes are affected cattle may die from thirst, starvation or accidents. Trigger factors are dusty conditions, flies, bright sunlight and physical irritation from things such as thistles.

In the human population “pink eye” or maybe more commonly in Australia, “red eye” are terms generally used to describe conjunctivitis, simply meaning inflammation of the conjunctiva, by whatever cause. (The conjunctiva is that thin, clear film that lies on the inside of the eyelids and covers the white part of the eyeball.)

The cause may be bacterial, but more often not. Viral conjunctivitis, allergic conjunctivitis and conjunctivitis associated with the wearing of contact lenses might be considered the more likely suspects. The trigger factors could be sometimes similar to those in cattle (but you would think thistles would rarely be involved) and whilst in cattle the damage can be so severe that blindness can be permanent, in humans the condition is often self limiting; or responds to simple self-management procedures.

Nevertheless, there are occasions when reference to a doctor is necessary for investigation and/or treatment to minimise the risk of serious complications. These occasions would include when there is severe eye pain or swelling, when the eyes are sensitive to light, if there is an eye injury or foreign body in the eye, and if there is headache, nausea or vomiting also present. In any event, check with your pharmacist before you self medicate.

The most commonly prescribed drops for eye infections contain the antibiotic chloramphenicol; and these eye drops are now available as pharmacist-only non-prescription medicines; however they shouldn’t necessarily be the first-choice treatment. Depending on your symptoms, antihistamine drops, artificial tears, saline irrigation or even non-medication management might be better options.

Dry eye is another common cause of “red eye”, usually as a result of inadequate production or tear fluid or increased evaporation of tears. The problem increases with age and is more common in women; and some medical conditions and many medicines can cause or worsen the effects of dry eye. Lubricating or moisturising eye drops, gels and ointments are very useful; but don’t forget to tell your pharmacist if you are taking any prescription medicines. You may just have identified the cause. Certain blood pressure medicines, hormone treatments, sedating antihistamines and antidepressants are just some of the medicines which could be implicated.

So-called vasoconstrictor eye drops (they contain ingredients such as naphazoline, phenylephrine and tetrahydrozoline) are amongst the most popular for reducing redness, congestion and discomfort caused by dust, smoke, swimming, eye strain and colds; however the actual benefit of these products is uncertain and they can have side effects, especially if used long term. Overuse can cause rebound congestion and redness. So, these drops should not be used for more than five consecutive days. For chronic dry eye conditions the moisturising/lubricating eye drops can be use daily, or even several times a day, on a continuing basis.

Remember, multi-use containers of all eye drops should be discarded four weeks after opening to avoid contamination and possible (re)infection. If you need eye drops only for occasional use, then the boxes of single use drops will be more economical.

You can get more advice on the best way to treat eye problems from those pharmacies around Australia which provide the Pharmaceutical Society’s *Self Care* health information. There’s a special “fact card” titled *Red and Dry Eyes*. The *Vision Impairment* and *Contact Lens Care* fact cards might also be useful.

For the location of the pharmacy nearest you providing the Self Care information, phone the Pharmaceutical Society on 1300 369 772 or check out the website: www.psa.org.au