

Selkirk Medical Group

Eye Care and Prevention of Ophthalmia Neonatorum

To prevent eye infection in the newborn, primarily from Gonorrhea or Chlamydia infection but also other bacterial infections.

What causes newborn eye infection?

Gonorrhea and Chlamydia are both sexually transmitted infections (STIs), which if present in the mother's vagina at birth can pass to the newborn and infect the eyes. Although both STIs often tested in pregnancy, no test is 100% reliable and may be asymptomatic in the mother and baby. There is also a risk of acquiring the infection after the screening test is done in early pregnancy. When undiagnosed and untreated such eye infections can cause blindness or systemic symptoms.

How can newborn eye infection be prevented?

Erythromycin, 0.5% antibiotic ointment is administered to the baby's eyes within two hours of birth. The British Columbia Health Act of 1995 states that all babies must be treated as a preventative measure (prophylactically).

What are the benefits to the use of erythromycin eye ointment?

The use of topical antibiotic eye ointment greatly reduces the risk of bacteria colonizing the eye and causing an infection. Although the primary bacterial infection is related to Chlamydia and Gonorrhea, other bacterial infections can also be prevented.

What are the risks associated with the use of erythromycin eye ointment?

Administration of the ointment is painless; however the baby will experience blurred vision immediately after applying it. There is the theoretical risk of antibiotic resistance to some organisms in the eye, however this has not been described in the literature.

Key Points

- When there is an increased risk of infection through the mother, treatment should be administered immediately after birth
- Erythromycin eye ointment is normally administered during the newborn exam within the first hours postpartum
- The erythromycin eye ointment is considered to be painless. However it may blur the baby's vision temporarily and is therefore timed not to interrupt the close bonding time that occurs immediately after birth
- If parents decline to have the erythromycin eye ointment administered after considering the risks and benefits, an Informed Refusal should be signed
- It is important to watch the baby's eyes for redness, discharge and swelling

