



## **Informed Consent for Erythromycin Eye Ointment**

### **What is erythromycin eye ointment and why is it used?**

Erythromycin eye ointment is a type of antibiotic ointment that is applied to a newborn baby's eyes after birth to prevent a type of pink eye infection called ophthalmia neonatorum. Ophthalmia neonatorum occurs as a result of untreated gonorrhea or chlamydia infection in the mother. A newborn that develops ophthalmia neonatorum can become blind as a result of the infection.

Before the development of antibiotics, 0.3% of infants became blind as a result of ophthalmia neonatorum. Currently, antibiotics are readily available and can be used to treat ophthalmia neonatorum infection and prevent blindness. In the United States, erythromycin ointment is used to treat all newborns, regardless of whether or not they are at risk of ophthalmia neonatorum or have an infection. The only way a newborn can acquire ophthalmia neonatorum is if the mother has gonorrhea or chlamydia.

The United States mandates the use of erythromycin eye prophylaxis (preventative treatment) for all newborns in many states. This includes newborns of mothers who do not have gonorrhea or chlamydia as well as newborns who were born via cesarean section and therefore not at risk of ophthalmia neonatorum. Many other countries do not routinely use prophylactic eye ointment.

Some research has indicated that the rate of ophthalmia neonatorum is the same for newborns treated with erythromycin eye ointment and those who receive no eye ointment. This means that the treatment may not be very effective. Research has shown that screening and treating the mother for gonorrhea and chlamydia is an effective approach. In Canada, the routine use of erythromycin eye ointment is no longer recommended because it is not considered to be effective.

### **Risks, benefits, and alternatives to treatment**

Risks of erythromycin eye ointment include:

- Mild irritation, eye redness, or blurred vision are the most common side effects. These side effects are usually mild and resolve without treatment.
- Interference with mother/infant bonding is a concern. Blurred vision or eye irritation can make it difficult for the newborn to bond immediately after birth.
- Allergic reactions. Severe allergic reactions are rare but are a possible side effect of erythromycin eye ointment. Signs and symptoms of an allergic reaction include rash, hives, difficulty breathing, swelling of the mouth/face, severe eye irritation/redness, and vision changes.
- Antibiotic resistance. The routine use (and overuse) of antibiotics can lead to the development of antibiotic-resistant bacteria. This makes it more difficult (or impossible) to treat people who actually have infections requiring the use of antibiotics.

Benefits of erythromycin eye ointment:

- The main benefit of antibiotic treatment is the reduction in the risk of your baby developing ophthalmia neonatorum if you have untreated gonorrhoea or chlamydia at the time of birth. However, erythromycin eye ointment is not 100% effective so the newborn should still be monitored and treated for signs of ophthalmia neonatorum if you have untreated gonorrhoea or chlamydia at the time of birth.

Alternative treatments include:

- The most effective prevention against ophthalmia neonatorum is the routine screening of mothers for gonorrhoea and chlamydia infection. Others who test positive should be treated and tested again. Mothers who have untreated infections at the time of birth should receive antibiotic therapy and their newborns should be closely monitored for signs of infection. Newborns exhibiting signs of ophthalmia neonatorum should be treated with antibiotics.

**Further information and resources**

CDC: <https://www.cdc.gov/std/stats10/trends.htm>

Canadian Paediatric Society Position Statement: <http://www.cps.ca/en/documents/position/ophthalmia-neonatorum>

Evidence Based Birth: <http://evidencebasedbirth.com/is-erythromycin-eye-ointment-always-necessary-for-newborns/>

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I have read about the options for erythromycin eye ointment treatment and have had the opportunity to ask questions and do my own research. I understand the risks and benefits of erythromycin eye ointment treatment as stated above. I have chosen the following options for erythromycin eye ointment treatment:

\_\_\_\_\_ I elect to treat my newborn with erythromycin eye ointment after birth.

\_\_\_\_\_ I decline to treat my newborn with erythromycin eye ointment after birth.

Client's signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Midwife's signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

## References:

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