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[Home](#) > What's up with eye drops for newborns?

What's up with eye drops for newborns? ^[1]

Dear Alice,

Why do doctors put drops in the eyes of newborn babies?

Answer

Dear Reader,

It is indeed common practice for health care providers to administer eye drops to newborns within an hour or two of birth. These drops are specifically for the purpose of preventing bacterial eye infections. Eye infections used to be a major cause of blindness in children, and were often due to the same bacteria that cause gonorrhea or chlamydia. When a someone is infected with these bacteria (about 20 percent of females with gonorrhea and 70 percent of females with chlamydia don't have identifiable symptoms), they're present in the vagina. As a baby travels through the birth canal, they can pick up bacteria present in the vaginal secretions or fluids.

Since eye infections caused by gonorrhea or chlamydia used to be such a common cause of blindness, many states now require antibiotic eye drops or ointments for newborns. Even if people are tested early on in their pregnancy, many health care providers feel that a sexually transmitted infection (STI) could have been contracted during pregnancy and that it's best that the drops be administered as a cautionary measure. There are also viral eye infections and conjunctivitis (caused by a blocked tear duct) that can create eye troubles for a newborn. Silver nitrate eye drops traditionally have been used to prevent eye infections. However, because these drops often cause the baby's eyes to be irritated, most hospitals now use erythromycin ointment instead.

Sometimes parents feel upset that the drops or ointment make their new baby's vision blurry. As a result, some parents request that the administration of drops or ointment be delayed until they and baby have had some time to gaze at each other and bond in the hours just after birth.

If you are curious about these requirements in your state, check online at your local department of health website to see if your state requires antibiotic ointment or drops to be administered for newborns. If the state does not require it, parents are able to decline the drops, even if the drops or ointment are part of hospital policy. There is usually a waiver parents can sign if they do not

consent to the drops. Isn't modern medicine grand?

Alice!

Category:

[General Health](#) [2]

[Eyes](#) [3]

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Resources

[Medical Services \(Morningside\)](#) [9]

[Medical Services \(CUIMC\)](#) [10]

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Footer menu

- ▼ [Contact Alice!](#)
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Links

- [1] <https://goaskalice.columbia.edu/answered-questions/whats-eye-drops-newborns>
- [2] <https://goaskalice.columbia.edu/category/general-health>
- [3] <https://goaskalice.columbia.edu/category/eyes>
- [4] <https://goaskalice.columbia.edu/answered-questions/pink-eye-side-mucus>
- [5] <https://goaskalice.columbia.edu/answered-questions/finding-name-my-baby-be>
- [6] <https://goaskalice.columbia.edu/answered-questions/genetics-eye-color-inheritance-2>
- [7] <https://goaskalice.columbia.edu/answered-questions/ouch-%E2%80%94-i-have-scratched-cornea-0>
- [8] <https://goaskalice.columbia.edu/answered-questions/anal-sex-safe-baby-way>
- [9] <https://goaskalice.columbia.edu/resource/medical-services-morningside>
- [10] <https://goaskalice.columbia.edu/resource/medical-services-cuimc>