

Chronic uveitis in children with arthritis

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What is chronic uveitis?

Chronic uveitis is a condition that can occur which causes swelling (or inflammation) within the eye. It doesn't happen to every child but we need to check the eyes regularly to make sure it has not developed because it can affect the eyesight, especially if it goes undetected.

What causes chronic uveitis?

When the immune system becomes overactive, it starts to attack parts of the body such as the joints and blood vessels. This is known as an 'auto-immune' disease and sometimes causes inflammation in the eyes.

Only 1 in 10 children with arthritis will develop uveitis and half the children have uveitis at their first check, so only 1 in 20 will be found to have problems after that. It is more common:

- in girls than boys
- if there are fewer joints affected by arthritis
- If the ANA* status is positive (some patients may not know their ANA status).

If uveitis is picked up promptly by eye checks, it is likely to respond well to treatment.

*ANA stands for anti-nuclear antibodies. High levels of ANA in the blood suggest an autoimmune disease.

What are the symptoms?

There may be no signs or symptoms as the chronic uveitis can be completely painless and slow to develop. However, a few children may experience symptoms such as blurred vision or 'floaters'.

It is important to seek help if you notice or suspect any of the following:

- Worsening (deterioration) in your child's eyesight – this may be noticed at school.

- An irregular (odd) shaped pupil or change in pupil size – the pupil is normally round and they are both normally the same size.
- A red eye – if the white part of the eye becomes red or pink in colour.
- An uncomfortable or painful eye.
- Sensitivity to light.

How is it diagnosed?

The screening test is very quick but very important. The **orthoptist** or **ophthalmologist** (eye doctor) looks into the eyes to see if there is any inflammation inside. They use a special piece of equipment called a **slit lamp**. This lets the orthoptist or eye doctor see if there are any inflammatory cells inside the eye.

Possible complications of chronic uveitis

Complications of chronic uveitis can include some degree of either permanent or reversible sight loss such as:

- development of a **cataract** (cloudy lens)
- **glaucoma** (damage to the optic nerve as a result of raised eye pressure)
- More rarely, they may get swelling of the back of the eye (chorioretinitis).

What to expect at the appointment

- You will usually be asked a few questions regarding what treatment, if any, your child is receiving for their arthritis, and the dosage and name of any medications your child is taking. It is worthwhile bringing a prescription or copy of medication.
- Your child's vision will be assessed.
- Your child may have their eye pressure tested.
- A slit lamp examination as mentioned previously.

The examination usually takes around 20 minutes from start to finish but please allow extra time in case anything else needs to be discussed, or for any delays.

How is it treated?

The aim of the treatment is to control the inflammation causing the uveitis.

Steroid eye drops, such as Prednisolone (Predforte) will be used to control the inflammation. They may be needed several times a day.

Dilating (mydriatic) drops such as Cyclopentolate may be used to relax the muscle which controls the iris. This helps control the pain and helps stop the iris from sticking to the lens of the eye which causes an irregular shaped pupil.

Steroid injections around the outside of the eye. This may be done under a general anaesthetic.

Eye pressure relieving drops, such as Xalatan or Timolol. These help to reduce the pressure within the eye which can cause a condition called glaucoma. If left untreated, glaucoma can cause damage to the optic nerve and affect vision.

If the above treatments do not control your child's eye inflammation, this will be discussed with the rheumatologist and your child may be given a different type of medication either by mouth or injection to help control it.

Possible effects of treatment

The steroid eye drops may sting slightly when they are put in and cause slight blurring of your child's vision temporarily.

In some patients they can cause raised pressure within the eye. The orthoptist or eye doctor will check for this at each visit.

The dilating drops will cause the pupil to look bigger and the eye may be uncomfortable in bright light for a few hours. Wearing sunglasses or a hat may help in these conditions. The vision may also be temporarily blurred whilst using these drops.

What is the prognosis or expected outcome of treatment?

Steroid drops are used until the inflammation settles down. It is important to follow the steroid eyedrop regime carefully. **Stopping the steroid drops too soon or suddenly may cause the inflammation in the eye to flare up or recur.**

Are there any possible complications of treatment?

If steroid eye drops have to be used very frequently or for a long time, the orthoptist and eye doctor will check for signs that the eye drops are not causing raised pressure within the eye or a cataract to develop.

Follow up

The first eye screening appointment should be within 6 weeks of onset of the arthritis and then at 2 monthly intervals for 6 months.

Then 3 or 4 monthly until approximately 12 years of age depending on the type of arthritis.

If your child is found to have uveitis, the eye doctor will want to see you more frequently until it has settled down again with treatment. Once the inflammation has settled, your child will go back to regular eye screening at 3 or 4 monthly intervals.

Further information

If you suspect that your child has an eye problem, please contact the Orthoptic Department on **01271 322469**. The orthoptist who leads the uveitis screening clinic is Sue Thorne.

You may also contact the main hospital switchboard on 01271 322577 and ask for the secretary to Mr Gibbon, Paediatric Consultant Ophthalmologist.

Useful contacts and websites

Arthritis research UK

Web: www.arthritisresearchuk.org

Children's Chronic Arthritis Association (CCAA)

Web: www.ccaa.org.uk

Tel: 01905 745595

Paediatric Rheumatology International Trials organisation (PRINTO)

Web: www.printo.it

Olivia's Vision

Web: oliviasvision.org

Tel: 08450 758 114

Royal National Institute of Blind people (RNIB)

Web: www.rnib.org.uk

Tel: 0303 123 9999

Uveitis Information Group

Web: www.uveitis.net

Tel: 08456045660

Email: info@uveitis.net

PALS

The Patient Advice and Liaison Service (PALS) ensures that the NHS listens to patients, relatives, carers and friends, answers questions and resolves concerns as quickly as possible. If you have a query or concern call 01271 314090 or email ndht.pals@nhs.net. You can also visit the PALS and Information Centre in person at North Devon District Hospital, Barnstaple.

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'Care Opinion' comments forms are on all wards or online at www.careopinion.org.uk.

Northern Devon Healthcare NHS Trust
Raleigh Park, Barnstaple
Devon EX31 4JB
Tel. 01271 322577
www.northdevonhealth.nhs.uk

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Tel: 01271 313970 / email: ndht.contactus@nhs.net