



## Erythromycin

### **What is it?**

Erythromycin is a macrolide antibiotic that kills a broad spectrum of bacteria. It is routinely placed in ointment form into the eyes of newborns to prevent infection of the eyes.

### **Why is it used?**

The practice of placing drops of dilute silver nitrate in newborns' eyes began in 1881 in an effort to protect children from infection and blindness due to gonorrhea in the mother. It has been decades since erythromycin ointment replaced silver nitrate, which, in addition to its antiseptic properties, also irritates the eyes, but the reason behind the practice remains the same. A mother who is infected with gonorrhea or chlamydia does have a significant chance of passing the infection to her child's eyes, which in turn can lead to blindness. Mothers who are not infected still carry bacteria in their vaginas, and these bacteria can be passed to the baby, however, the risk of infection is low and blindness extremely rare.

The Colorado Revised Statutes 25-4-303 (2011) states:

It is the duty of any physician, nurse, or other person who assists or is in charge at the birth of any infant or has the care of the same after birth to treat the eyes of the infant with a prophylaxis approved by the department of public health and environment. Such treatment shall be given as soon as practicable after the birth of the infant and always within one hour. If any redness, swelling, inflammation, or gathering of pus appears in the eyes of such infant, or upon the lids or about the eyes, within two weeks after birth, any nurse or other person having care of the infant shall report the same to some competent practicing physician within six hours after its discovery.

### **What are the benefits?**

The ointment will kill any bacteria that may have come in contact with the baby's eyes on its way through the birth canal.

### **What are the risks?**

If either parent is allergic to erythromycin it would be contraindicated to give it to their newborn. The ointment will cause the baby's eyelids to be red and puffy for 12-24 hours and will temporarily blur the baby's vision. It does not sting.