

## Information Sheet: Eye Prophylaxis

### *What is eye prophylaxis?*

Eye prophylaxis is an antibacterial eye ointment administered to newborns to prevent blindness caused by a chlamydia and/or gonorrhea infection in the mother's body. Since all mothers do not know if they are infected or not, it has become widespread care to treat all newborns with eye prophylaxis. This strategy has dramatically decreased the amount of newborn blindness caused by infection. All 50 states require some eye treatment at birth to prevent these infections. Oregon state law requires all infants be evaluated for risk of infection. If the newborn is at risk, eye prophylaxis in the form of erythromycin ophthalmic ointment, tetracycline ophthalmic ointment or silver nitrate must be applied to the eyes within two hours of birth.

### *Why would my baby be at risk for blindness?*

Sexually transmitted diseases are a major cause of neonatal eye infections. If the eyes are left unprotected, the infection can cause permanent blindness. Approximately 3 to 4 million Americans acquire a genital chlamydial infection each year, and more than 150,000 infants are born to mothers with chlamydial infections. Chlamydia, unlike other sexually transmitted diseases, has no noticeable signs. Even with screening, these bacteria may not be detected. It is very likely, that a mother may be infected without her knowing. If the bacteria are present in the birth canal, it can be transferred to the tissues surrounding the eyes the infant as the baby is being born. Currently in the United States it is estimated that 4 million women to have chlamydia infections. This means there are potentially thousands of babies that are at risk for infection.

### *What are the consequences if my baby is left untreated?*

Only those babies born to mothers with a gonococcal or chlamydial infection are at risk gonococcal ophthalmia neonatorum or newborn blindness. Only these babies need to have the eye prophylaxis. If the baby is left untreated and does come in contact with the infection, the gonorrhea and chlamydia bacteria can cause permanent blindness. Not only can the bacteria cause blindness, it can spread to other parts of the body such as the lungs causing pneumonia.

### *How is the eye prophylaxis administered?*

Unless declined, an antibiotic eye ointment will be applied one time to the eyes of the newborn within two hours of birth. The most commonly used ointments is 0.5% erythromycin ophthalmic ointment. To administer, a one centimeter ribbon of ointment is placed in the lower conjunctiva of each eye. Other forms of prophylaxis, although rarely used is 1% tetracycline and 1% silver nitrate.

### *What are the side effects of the eye prophylaxis?*

As with any medication there is a risk of side effects. Reported side effects of silver nitrate are pain, swelling and redness for up to a few days. Very few babies that were given topical erythromycin and tetracycline have reported significant side effects. Side effect from these ointment including pain and skin irritation. All three types of treatment may cause cloudiness or temporary vision impairment.