

CONJUNCTIVITIS: WHAT IS PINK EYE?

Conjunctivitis is the term used to describe swelling (inflammation) of the conjunctiva — the thin, filmy membrane that covers the inside of your eyelids and the white part of your eye (known as the sclera). Often this condition is called "pink eye."

The conjunctiva, which contains tiny blood vessels, produces mucus to keep the surface of your eye moist and protected. When the conjunctiva becomes irritated or swollen, the blood vessels become larger and more prominent, making your eye appear red. Signs of pink eye may occur in one or both eyes.

There are three types of conjunctivitis:

- Bacterial conjunctivitis
 - This is a highly contagious form of pink eye caused by bacterial infections. This type of conjunctivitis usually causes a red eye with a lot of pus.
- Viral conjunctivitis
 - The most common cause of pinkeye is the same virus that causes the common cold, and is also very contagious.
- Allergic conjunctivitis
 - This form of conjunctivitis is caused by the body's reaction to an allergen or irritant. It is not contagious.

CAUSES

The most common causes of pinkeye (conjunctivitis) are:

- Infections (viral or bacterial)
- Allergies
- Irritation from something in the environment

Viral infection is the most common cause of conjunctivitis. This same virus produces the familiar red and watery eyes, sore throat and runny nose of the common cold. Symptoms of conjunctivitis can last from one to two weeks and then will disappear on their own. Discomfort, however, can be minimized with cool compresses applied to the eyes.

Bacterial infections, such as Staphylococcus or Streptococcus, cause a red eye that has a lot of pus. Some bacterial infections, however, may be ongoing infections that produce little or no discharge except for some mild crusting of the eyelashes in the morning. Antibiotic eyedrops are typically used to treat bacterial conjunctivitis.

Allergic conjunctivitis is not infectious or contagious. It occurs when the body is exposed to something that causes an allergic reaction, such as pollen or pet dander, and is often seasonal. Symptoms include redness, itching, burning, tearing, enlarged vessels in the sclera (white part of the eye) and puffy eyelids. Treatment often includes applying cool compresses to the eyes and taking antihistamines.

Environmental irritants, such as smoke or fumes, may also cause conjunctivitis. The symptoms are usually similar to those of allergic conjunctivitis.

HOW DO YOU GET PINK EYE?

Conjunctivitis, whether bacterial or viral, can be quite contagious if it is infectious. Some of the most common ways to get the contagious form of pink eye:

- Reusing handkerchiefs and towels when wiping your face and eyes
- Forgetting to wash your hands often
- Touching your eyes
- Using old cosmetics, and/or sharing them with other people
- Not cleaning your contact lenses properly

Children are usually most susceptible to getting pink eye from bacteria or viruses because they are in close contact with so many others in school or day care centers.

Generally, conjunctivitis is easily treated. However, if symptoms continue for an extended period of time after treatment, you should have your eyes examined by your ophthalmologist (Eye M.D.), as these symptoms may indicate a more serious eye problem. Several eye diseases can cause red eye, some of which can lead to blindness unless diagnosed and treated.

SIGNS AND SYMPTOMS

If you have a bacterial infection causing your pink eye, you may find crusting on your eyelids and a heavy discharge from your eyes that may be greenish at times. This infection may spread to both eyes.

With viral conjunctivitis, crusty eyelids and watery eyes with a light discharge is likely. In many cases of viral pinkeye, only one eye is infected.

If allergies are causing your conjunctivitis, you will find your eyes to be itchy, red and tearing. It is likely you may have a stuffy, runny or itchy nose as well.

Signs of pinkeye:

- Inflammation (swelling) of the eye
- Redness in the white of the eye (conjunctiva) or the inner eyelid
- Increased tearing
- Soreness of the eye
- A feeling of something in the eye
- Itchiness of the eye
- Hazy or blurred vision due to mucus or pus
- Excess mucus (pus)
- Crusting of eyelashes in the morning

DIAGNOSIS

In some cases, additional diagnostic tests can be helpful in diagnosing pink eye. Your Eye M.D. may collect a sample (culture) for analysis. To do this, he or she will numb your eye and swab the surface to collect a sample. The analysis of this culture will help determine if the infection is caused by a bacteria or a virus, which will guide appropriate treatment.

TREATMENT

Viral conjunctivitis treatment

With viral conjunctivitis, pink eye symptoms can last from one to two weeks and then will disappear on their own. Discomfort, however, can be minimized with cool compresses applied to the eyes, which is usually the only treatment that is necessary.

Bacterial conjunctivitis treatment

For bacterial conjunctivitis, your Eye MD will typically prescribe antibiotic eye drops to treat the infection.

Allergic conjunctivitis treatment

For allergic conjunctivitis, treatment often includes applying cool compresses to the eyes and taking antihistamines.

Practicing good hygiene can help prevent the spread of conjunctivitis if you are infected. You should:

- Wash your hands often.
- Avoid touching your eyes with your hands.
- Avoid reusing towels, washcloths, handkerchiefs and tissues to wipe your face and eyes.
- Change your pillowcase frequently.
- Replace your eye cosmetics regularly with new ones, and do not share them with other people.
- Always clean your contact lenses properly.

Pink eye remedies

A compress applied to your closed eyelids can relieve some of the discomfort of pink eye. To make a compress, soak in water then wring out a clean, lint-free cloth. If you have conjunctivitis in one eye only, don't use the same cloth on both eyes so you won't spread the infection from one eye to the other. If you have bacterial or viral conjunctivitis, a warm compress is usually best. If your eyes are irritated by allergic conjunctivitis, try a cool water compress.