

Pink eye (conjunctivitis)

Pink eye (conjunctivitis) is an inflammation or infection of the transparent membrane (conjunctiva) that lines your eyelid and part of your eyeball. Inflammation causes small blood vessels in the conjunctiva to become more prominent, which is what causes the pink or red cast to the whites of your eyes.

The cause of pink eye is commonly a bacterial or viral infection, an allergic reaction or — in newborns — an incompletely opened tear duct.

Though the inflammation of pink eye makes it an irritating condition, it rarely affects your sight. If you suspect pink eye, you can take steps to ease your discomfort. But because pink eye can be contagious, early diagnosis and treatment is best to help limit its spread.

The most common pink eye symptoms include:

- Redness in one or both eyes
- Itchiness in one or both eyes
- A gritty feeling in one or both eyes
- A discharge in one or both eyes that forms a crust during the night
- Tearing

Pink eye may make you feel as if you've got something in one or both of your eyes that you just can't remove. When you wake up in the morning, your eyes may seem to be pasted shut from the discharge coming from your eyes.

Causes of pink eye include:

- Viruses
- Bacteria
- Allergies
- A chemical splash in the eye
- A foreign object in the eye

Viral and bacterial conjunctivitis

Viral conjunctivitis and bacterial conjunctivitis may affect one or both eyes. Viral conjunctivitis usually produces a watery or mucous discharge. Bacterial conjunctivitis often produces a thicker, yellow-green discharge and may be associated with a respiratory infection or with a sore throat. Both viral and bacterial conjunctivitis can be associated with colds.

Both viral and bacterial types are very contagious. Adults and children alike can develop both of these types of pink eye. However, bacterial conjunctivitis is more common in children than it is in adults.

Allergic conjunctivitis

Allergic conjunctivitis affects both eyes and is a response to an allergy-causing substance such as pollen. In response to allergens, your body produces an antibody called immunoglobulin E (IgE). This antibody triggers special cells called mast cells in the mucous lining of your eyes and airways to release inflammatory substances, including histamines. Your body's release of histamine can produce a number of allergy signs and symptoms, including red or pink eyes.

If you have allergic conjunctivitis, you may experience intense itching, tearing and inflammation of the eyes — as well as itching, sneezing and watery nasal discharge. You may also experience swelling of the membrane (conjunctiva) that lines your eyelids and part of your eyeballs, resulting in what may look like clear blisters on the whites of your eyes.

Conjunctivitis resulting from irritation

Irritation from a chemical splash or foreign object in your eye is also associated with conjunctivitis. Sometimes, flushing and cleaning the eye to rid it of the chemical or object causes redness and irritation. Signs and symptoms, which may include a mucous discharge instead of pus, usually clear up on their own within about a day.

Risk factors for pink eye include:

- Exposure to an allergen for allergic conjunctivitis
- Exposure to someone infected with the viral or bacterial form of conjunctivitis

Both viral and bacterial conjunctivitis are common among children and are very contagious. Someone with conjunctivitis may be contagious for seven to 14 days after signs and symptoms first appear.

People who wear contact lenses, especially extended-wear lenses, may be more prone to conjunctivitis.

Pink eye can be an irritating condition, but it's usually harmless to your sight and typically doesn't require extensive or emergency treatment. Yet because pink eye can be highly contagious for as long as two weeks after signs and symptoms begin, it's important to seek diagnosis and treatment early.

Keep children with bacterial conjunctivitis away from child care facilities or school until after they start treatment. Children with viral conjunctivitis may be contagious for several days to as long as a week or more. Check with your doctor if you have any questions about when your child can return to school or child care. Most schools and child care facilities require that your child wait at least 24 hours after starting treatment before returning to school or child care.

Your doctor may take a sample of eye secretions from the conjunctiva for laboratory analysis to determine which form of infection you have and how best to treat it.

Bacterial conjunctivitis

If your infection is bacterial, your doctor may prescribe antibiotic eye drops as pink eye treatment, and the infection should clear within several days. Antibiotic eye ointment, in place of eye drops, is sometimes prescribed for treating bacterial pink eye in children. An ointment is often easier to administer to an infant or young child than are eye drops, though they may blur vision for up to 20 minutes after application. With either form of medication, you should notice a marked improvement in signs and symptoms within one to two days. Be sure to use the medication for the entire time your doctor prescribes it, to prevent recurrence of the infection.

Viral conjunctivitis

Viral conjunctivitis doesn't respond to treatment with antibiotic eye drops or ointment. Like with a common cold, you can use an over-the-counter remedy to relieve some symptoms, but the virus just has to run its course. You may notice a worsening of symptoms in the first three to five days. After that, your signs and symptoms should gradually clear on their own. It may take up to two to three weeks from the time you were infected for the virus to go away.

Allergic conjunctivitis

If the irritation is allergic conjunctivitis, your doctor may prescribe one of many different types of eye drops. These may include antihistamines, decongestants, mast cell stabilizers, steroids and anti-inflammatory drops.

Practicing good hygiene is the best way to control the spread of pink eye. Once the infection has been diagnosed, follow these steps:

- Don't touch your eyes with your hands.
- Wash your hands thoroughly and frequently.
- Change your towel and washcloth daily, and don't share them with others.
- Change your pillowcase often.
- Discard eye cosmetics, particularly mascara.
- Don't use anyone else's eye cosmetics or personal eye-care items.
- Follow your eye doctor's instructions on proper contact lens care.

If your child is infected, avoid close contact with other children. Many schools send children with conjunctivitis home, and will likely ask that your child receive at least one full day of treatment before returning.

You can soothe the discomfort of pink eye by applying warm compresses to your affected eye or eyes. To make a compress, soak a clean, lint-free cloth in warm water and wring it out before applying it gently to your closed eyelids.

For allergic conjunctivitis, avoid rubbing your eyes so that you don't release more histamines. Instead, use cool compresses to soothe your eyes. You might also try specially formulated over-the-counter eye drops such as Naphcon-A or Opcon-A, which contain an antihistamine and an agent that constricts blood vessels.