

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 pink eye 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.



Conjunctivitis: Causes of Pink Eye

The most common causes of pink eye (conjunctivitis) are:

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

Viral infection is a common cause of conjunctivitis. This same virus that produces red and watery eyes also causes the sore throat and runny nose of the common cold. Symptoms of viral conjunctivitis can last from a few days to two weeks and then will disappear on their own. Discomfort, however, can be minimized with cool compresses applied to the eyes. Antibiotic eyedrops do not cure viral conjunctivitis.

Bacterial infections, such as *Staphylococcus* or *Streptococcus*, cause a red eye with a lot of pus. Often the eyelids are glued shut on awakening. Infrequently, bacterial infections will produce little or no discharge except for some mild crusting of the eyelashes in the morning. Antibiotic eyedrops are often prescribed because they speed the eye's healing and reduce contagion.

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 other environmental allergen, or pet dander. The primary symptom is itching. Other common symptoms include redness of the conjunctiva, burning, tearing, and puffy eyelids. Occasionally the conjunctiva becomes swollen. Treatment often includes applying cool compresses to the eyes and using anti-allergy eyedrops and artificial tears. Many patients find that drops that have been cooled in the refrigerator are especially comforting. Oral anti-allergy medications do not significantly improve the symptoms of ocular allergies.

Environmental irritants, such as smoke or fumes, may also cause conjunctivitis. The symptoms are burning and irritation, with no discharge or watery discharge.

How do you get infectious pink eye?

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

- Forgetting to wash your hands often and touching your eyes;
- Reusing tissues and towels when wiping your face and eyes; or
- Not cleaning your contact lenses properly and using poorly fitting contact lenses or decorative contacts.

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.

Conjunctivitis is typically a short-lived condition that may require eyedrops. 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.

Conjunctivitis: Pink Eye Symptoms

The pink eye symptoms you have may vary based on the type of conjunctivitis you have.

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. While many cases of viral pink eye infect only one eye, this infection can also spread to the other eye.

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 pink eye

- Mild eyelid swelling
- Redness in the white of the eye (conjunctiva) or the inner eyelid
- Increased tearing, mucous or pus production
- Eye irritation
- Foreign body sensation
- Itchiness of the eye
- Mild blurred vision due to mucus or pus
- Crusting of eyelashes in the morning, possibly gluing the eyes shut

Conjunctivitis: Pink Eye Diagnosis

Your Eye M.D. can diagnose most cases of conjunctivitis with an eye examination. Tell your doctor whether your pink eye symptoms came on gradually or appeared suddenly, and whether you have been exposed to anyone else with pink eye symptoms.

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. Most often no culture is taken and the diagnosis is made in the office.

Conjunctivitis: Pink Eye Treatment

How your pink eye is treated usually depends on the form of conjunctivitis you have. Your eye doctor may have taken a swab sample from your eye to help determine if your pink eye is viral or bacterial.

Viral conjunctivitis treatment

With viral conjunctivitis, [symptoms](#) can last from one to two weeks and then will typically disappear on their own.

Discomfort can be minimized with cool compresses applied to the eye and cool artificial tears. This is typically the only treatment that is necessary. Severe cases can benefit from anti-inflammatory drops that should only be prescribed by an ophthalmologist.

Bacterial conjunctivitis treatment

For bacterial conjunctivitis, your Eye M.D. will typically prescribe antibiotic eye drops to treat the infection. Occasionally it is difficult to distinguish bacterial from viral conjunctivitis, and in this case drops will likely be prescribed.

Allergic conjunctivitis treatment

For allergic conjunctivitis, treatment often includes applying cool compresses to the eyes and using allergy eyedrops and artificial tears that have been cooled in the refrigerator.

Practicing good hygiene can help prevent the spread of infectious conjunctivitis. 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. In the case of disposable contacts, follow the instructions on the box and dispose when advised.

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.

Over-the-counter lubricating eyedrops (artificial tears) may also provide relief from pink eye symptoms. Patients with allergies will benefit from the drops being refrigerated.

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