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## Diseases and Conditions

# Pink eye (conjunctivitis)

By Mayo Clinic Staff

Pink eye (conjunctivitis) is an inflammation or infection of the transparent membrane (conjunctiva) that lines your eyelid and covers the white part of your eyeball. When small blood vessels in the conjunctiva become inflamed, they're more visible. This is what causes the whites of your eyes to appear reddish or pink.

Pink eye is commonly caused by a bacterial or viral infection or an allergic reaction. It may affect one or both eyes.

Pink eye can be irritating, but it rarely affects your vision. Treatments can help ease the discomfort of pink eye. Because pink eye can be contagious, early diagnosis and treatment can help limit its spread.

Pink eye may affect one or both eyes. Its signs and symptoms include:

- Redness
- Itchiness
- A gritty feeling
- A discharge that forms a crust during the night that may prevent your eye or eyes from opening in the morning
- Tearing

## When to see a doctor

Make an appointment with your doctor if you notice any signs or symptoms you think might be pink eye. Pink eye can be highly contagious for as long as two weeks after signs and symptoms begin. Early diagnosis and treatment can protect people around you from getting pink eye too.

If you wear contact lenses, stop using them as soon as your symptoms begin. If your eyes don't get better within 12 to 24 hours, make an appointment with your eye doctor. He or she can check whether you have a more serious eye infection related to contact lens use.

In addition, other serious eye conditions can cause eye redness. Seek urgent care if you also experience pain, light sensitivity or blurred vision.

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 discharge. Bacterial conjunctivitis often produces a thicker, yellow-green discharge. Both types can be associated with colds or symptoms of a respiratory infection, such as a sore throat.

Both viral and bacterial types are very contagious. They are spread through direct or indirect contact with the eye secretions of someone who's infected.

Adults and children alike can develop both of these types of pink eye. 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 sneezing and watery nasal discharge.

## **Conjunctivitis resulting from irritation**

Irritation from a chemical splash or a 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 watery eyes and a mucous discharge, usually clear up on their own within a day or two.

Your risk of having pink eye increases with:

- Exposure to something for which you have an allergy (allergic conjunctivitis)
- Exposure to someone infected with the viral or bacterial form of conjunctivitis

- Use of contact lenses

In both children and adults, pink eye can cause inflammation in the cornea. This can affect vision. Prompt evaluation and treatment by your doctor can reduce the risk of complications.

Start by seeing your family doctor if you have any eye-related signs or symptoms that worry you. If your signs and symptoms persist or get worse, despite treatment, your doctor may refer you to an eye specialist (ophthalmologist). If your condition is caused by allergens, you may need to see an allergy specialist.

Because appointments can be brief, it's a good idea to be well-prepared. Here's some information to help you get ready.

## What you can do

- **Be aware of any pre-appointment restrictions.** At the time you make the appointment, ask if you need to do anything in advance, such as stop wearing contact lenses or refrain from using eyedrops.
- **List any symptoms you're experiencing**, including any that may seem unrelated to the reason for which you scheduled the appointment.
- **Make a list of all medications**, vitamins and supplements that you're taking.
- **List questions to ask** your doctor.

For pink eye, some basic questions to ask your doctor include:

- What's the most likely cause of my symptoms?
- What kinds of tests do I need?
- What treatments are available?
- How long will I be contagious after starting treatment?
- Is there a generic alternative to the medicine you're prescribing me?
- Do you have any brochures or other printed material that I can take with me? What websites do you recommend?
- Do I need to come back for a follow-up visit?
- Is this a threat to my vision?

## What to expect from your doctor

Your doctor is likely to ask you a number of questions. Being ready to answer them may allow time later to cover points you want to address. Your doctor may ask:

- When did you begin experiencing symptoms?
- Have your symptoms been continuous or occasional?
- How severe are your symptoms?

- Does anything improve your symptoms?
- What, if anything, appears to worsen your symptoms?
- Do your symptoms affect one eye or both eyes?
- Do you use contact lenses?
- How do you clean your contact lenses?
- How often do you replace your contact lens storage case?
- Have you had close contact with anyone who has pink eye or cold or flu symptoms?
- Has your vision been affected?

## **What you can do in the meantime**

If you use contact lenses, remove them until you can see your doctor. Wash your hands frequently to lessen the chance of infecting other people. Don't share towels with other people for the same reason.

You could try artificial tears. Or apply warm or cold compresses to your eyes for a few minutes several times a day. These steps may ease your discomfort until you see your doctor.

To determine whether you have pink eye, your doctor will ask you about your health history and symptoms and examine your eyes. He or she may also take a sample of eye secretions for laboratory analysis if:

- You have a very severe case of conjunctivitis
- Your corneas are affected
- You've had repeated infections that aren't responding to treatment

If your pink eye is caused by allergies, your doctor may suggest allergy testing to help determine which specific allergens to avoid.

## **Treatment for bacterial conjunctivitis**

More than half of bacterial conjunctivitis cases will clear up in one to two weeks without treatment. Taking an antibiotic may speed up the healing process. Your doctor may prescribe antibiotic eyedrops or ointment. Ointment may blur vision for up to 20 minutes after application.

With either form of medication, expect signs and symptoms to start getting better in a few days. Follow your doctor's instructions and use the antibiotics for the complete period prescribed. This helps prevent the infection from recurring.

## **Treatment for viral conjunctivitis**

In most cases, no treatment is available for viral conjunctivitis. Your doctor may prescribe an antiviral medication if your condition is caused by the herpes simplex virus.

Viral conjunctivitis often begins in one eye and then infects the other eye within a few days. Your signs and symptoms will likely clear up as the virus runs its course over one to two weeks.

## Treatment for allergic conjunctivitis

If you have allergic conjunctivitis, your doctor may prescribe from among many different types of eyedrops for people with allergies. These may include:

- Drugs that help control allergic reactions, such as a combination of antihistamines and mast cell stabilizers
- Drugs that help control inflammation, such as decongestants, steroids and anti-inflammatory eyedrops

Try these tips to help you cope with the signs and symptoms of pink eye:

- **Apply a compress to your eyes.** To make a compress, soak a clean, lint-free cloth in water and wring it out. Then apply it gently to your closed eyelids for a few minutes several times a day. Generally, a cool water compress will feel the most soothing. But you can also use a warm compress if that feels better to you.

If pink eye affects only one eye, don't touch both eyes with the same cloth. This reduces the risk of spreading an infection from one eye to the other.

- **Use eyedrops.** Over-the-counter eyedrops called artificial tears may relieve symptoms. Some eyedrops contain antihistamines or other medications that can be helpful for people with allergic conjunctivitis.

Avoid eyedrops for red eye (Visine, Clear Eyes) because they tend to work for a while then cause rebound redness.

- **Stop wearing contact lenses.** If you wear contact lenses, stop wearing them until your eyes feel better. How long you'll need to go without contact lenses depends on what's causing your conjunctivitis.

Ask your doctor whether you should throw away your disposable contacts, cleaning solution or lens case. If your lenses aren't disposable, clean them thoroughly before using them again.

- **Avoid whatever causes your symptoms.** This tip may be helpful if you have allergic conjunctivitis.
- **Wash your clothes frequently.** This tip may be helpful if you have allergic conjunctivitis.
- **Bathe or shower before bedtime.** This tip may be helpful if you have allergic conjunctivitis.

## Preventing the spread of pink eye

Practice good hygiene to control the spread of pink eye. For instance:

- Don't touch your eyes with your hands.
- Wash your hands often.
- Use only clean towels and washcloths.
- Don't share towels or washcloths.
- Change your pillowcases often.
- Avoid swimming in a swimming pool.
- Throw away your eye cosmetics, such as mascara.
- Don't share eye cosmetics or personal eye care items.
- Use any antibiotics for the complete period prescribed.

Pink eye symptoms may resolve in three to seven days. Children with viral conjunctivitis may be contagious for a week or more. Children may return to school when the redness and discharge in their eyes subsides.

If your child has bacterial conjunctivitis, keep him or her away from school until after treatment is started. 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. Check with your doctor if you have any questions about when your child can return to school or child care.

## Preventing pink eye in newborns

Newborns' eyes are susceptible to bacteria normally present in the mother's birth canal. These bacteria cause no symptoms in the mother. In rare cases, these bacteria can cause infants to develop a serious form of conjunctivitis known as ophthalmia neonatorum. This condition needs treatment without delay to preserve sight. That's why shortly after birth, an antibiotic ointment is applied to every newborn's eyes. The ointment helps prevent eye infection.

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