



# Conjunctivitis (Pink Eye)

## What is conjunctivitis?

Conjunctivitis is inflammation (swelling) of the conjunctiva—the thin layer that lines the inside of the eyelid and covers the white part of the eye. Conjunctivitis is often called "pink eye" or "red eye" because it can cause the white of the eye to take on a pink or red color.

## What causes conjunctivitis?

The most common causes of conjunctivitis are viruses, bacteria, and allergens.

**Viral conjunctivitis-** Can be caused by a number of different viruses, many of which may be associated with an upper respiratory tract infection, cold, or sore throat.

**Bacterial Conjunctivitis-** Caused by the infection of the eye with certain bacteria.

**Allergic Conjunctivitis-** Caused by the body's reaction to certain substances to which it is allergic, such as pollen from trees, plants, grasses, and weeds; dust mites; molds; dander from animals; contact lenses and lens solution; and cosmetics.

## How is it spread?

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. Allergic conjunctivitis is not contagious.

## What is the incubation period?

**Viral Conjunctivitis-** Is typically mild and usually clears up in 7-14 days without treatment and resolves without any long-term effects. In some cases, it can take 2-3 weeks or more for viral conjunctivitis to completely clear up, depending on whether complications develop.

**Bacterial Conjunctivitis-** Cases are typically mild and can last as few as 2-3 days or up to 2-3 weeks. Many cases improve in 2-5 days without treatment. However, topical antibiotics are often prescribed to treat the infection.

**Allergic Conjunctivitis-** No incubation period; clears up once the allergen or irritant is removed or after treatment with allergy medications.

## What are the signs and symptoms?

- Pink or red color in the white of the eye(s) (often one eye for bacterial and often both eyes for viral or allergic conjunctivitis)
- Swelling of the conjunctiva (the thin layer that lines the white part of the eye and the inside of the eyelid) and/or eyelids
- Increased tearing
- Discharge of pus, especially yellow-green (more common in bacterial conjunctivitis)
- Itching, irritation, and/or burning
- Feeling like a foreign body is in the eye(s) or an urge to rub the eye(s)
- Crusting of eyelids or lashes sometimes occurs, especially in the morning
- Symptoms of a cold, flu, or other respiratory infection may also be present

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- Sensitivity to bright light sometimes occurs
- Enlargement and/or tenderness, in some cases, of the lymph node in front of the ear. This enlargement may feel like a small lump when touched. (Lymph nodes act as filters in the body, collecting and destroying viruses and bacteria.)
- Symptoms of allergy, such as an itchy nose, sneezing, a scratchy throat, or asthma may be present in cases of allergic conjunctivitis
- Contact lenses that do not stay in place on the eye and/or feel uncomfortable due to bumps that may form under the eyelid

#### Should a person with conjunctivitis be isolated?

Exclude from work/school until prescribed treatment has been given for 24-48 hours or condition improves.

#### What type of treatment and care should be given?

**Viral conjunctivitis-** Most cases of viral conjunctivitis are mild. The infection will usually clear up in 7–14 days without treatment and without any long-term consequences. In some cases, viral conjunctivitis can take 2-3 weeks or more to clear up, especially if complications arise.

Artificial tears and cold packs may be used to relieve the dryness and inflammation (swelling) caused by conjunctivitis. (Artificial tears can be bought in stores without a doctor’s prescription.) Antiviral medication can be prescribed by a physician to treat more serious forms of conjunctivitis, such as those caused by herpes simplex virus or varicella-zoster virus. Antibiotics will not improve viral conjunctivitis—these drugs are not effective against viruses.

**Bacterial conjunctivitis-** Antibiotics can help shorten the illness and reduce the spread of infection to others. Many topical antibiotics (drugs

given as eye drops or ointment) are effective for treating bacterial conjunctivitis. Your healthcare provider may prescribe antibiotic eye drops or ointment as conjunctivitis treatment, and the infection should clear within several days. Artificial tears and cold compresses may be used to relieve some of the dryness and inflammation.

However, mild bacterial conjunctivitis may get better without antibiotic treatment and without any severe complications.

**Allergic Conjunctivitis-** Conjunctivitis caused by an allergy usually improves when the allergen (such as pollen or animal dander) is removed. Allergy medications and certain eye drops (topical antihistamine and vasoconstrictors), including some prescription eye drops, can also provide relief from allergic conjunctivitis. For conjunctivitis caused by contact lenses, an eye doctor may recommend removing lenses and keeping them out for a period of time.

#### How can conjunctivitis be prevented?

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 a clean towel and washcloth daily.
- Don't share towels or washcloths.
- Change your pillowcases often.
- Throw away your eye cosmetics, such as mascara.
- Don't share eye cosmetics or personal eye care items.

Adapted from: “Conjunctivitis” Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2014 (<http://www.cdc.gov/conjunctivitis/>, accessed 6 May 2014)