

Conjunctivitis / Pink Eye

Conjunctivitis is a common eye condition worldwide. It causes 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.

The most common causes of conjunctivitis are viruses, bacteria, and allergens. But there are other causes, including chemicals, fungi, certain diseases, and contact lens use (especially the extended-wear type). The conjunctiva can also become irritated by foreign bodies in the eye and by indoor and outdoor air pollution caused, for example, by chemical vapors, fumes, smoke, or dust.

Viral Conjunctivitis

Viral conjunctivitis is caused by infection of the eye with a virus. Viral conjunctivitis

- Can be caused by a number of different viruses, many of which are associated with an upper respiratory tract infection, cold, or sore throat.
- Usually begins in one eye and may progress to the second eye within days.
- Spreads easily and rapidly between people and can result in epidemics.
- Is typically mild, with symptoms being the worst on days 3–5 of infection. The condition 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

Bacterial conjunctivitis is caused by infection of the eye with certain bacteria. Bacterial conjunctivitis

- Usually begins in one eye and may sometimes progress to the second eye.
- Is a leading cause of children being absent from day care or school (Patel, 2007).
- 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 (Hurwitz, 2006). However, topical antibiotics are often prescribed to treat the infection.

Allergic Conjunctivitis

Allergic conjunctivitis is 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. Allergic conjunctivitis

- Occurs more frequently among people with other allergic conditions, such as hay fever, asthma, and eczema.
- Usually occurs in both eyes.
- Can occur seasonally, when pollen counts are high.

- Can occur year-round due to indoor allergens, such as dust mites and animal dander.
- May result, in some people, from exposure to certain drugs and cosmetics.
- Clears up once the allergen or irritant is removed or after treatment with allergy medications.

It can be hard to determine the exact cause of every case of conjunctivitis. This is because some signs and symptoms of the condition can differ depending on the cause, and other signs and symptoms are similar no matter what caused the conjunctivitis.

Symptoms of conjunctivitis can include

- 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
- 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

Sometimes there are situations that can help your healthcare provider determine what is causing the conjunctivitis. For example, if a person with allergies develops conjunctivitis when the pollen count increases in the spring, this would be a sign that he or she might have allergic conjunctivitis. And if someone develops conjunctivitis during an outbreak of viral conjunctivitis, this would be a sign that he or she might have viral conjunctivitis.

Treatment

The treatment for conjunctivitis depends on the cause. It is not always necessary to see a healthcare provider for conjunctivitis. But, as noted below, there are times when it is important to seek medical care.

Viral Conjunctivitis

Most cases of viral conjunctivitis are mild. Days 3-5 of infection are often the worst, but 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

Mild bacterial conjunctivitis may get better without antibiotic treatment. However, 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.

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. In some cases, a combination of drugs may be needed to improve symptoms. Your doctor can help if you have conjunctivitis caused by an allergy.

When to Seek Medical Care

A healthcare provider should be seen if

- Conjunctivitis is accompanied by moderate to severe pain in the eye(s).
- Conjunctivitis is accompanied by vision problems, such as sensitivity to light or blurred vision, that does not improve when any discharge that is present is wiped from the eye(s).
- Conjunctivitis is accompanied by intense redness in the eye(s).
- Conjunctivitis symptoms become worse or persist when a patient is suspected of having a severe form of viral conjunctivitis—for example, a type caused by herpes simplex virus or varicella-zoster virus (the cause of chickenpox and shingles).
- Conjunctivitis occurs in a patient who is immunocompromised (has a weakened immune system) from HIV infection, cancer treatment, or other medical conditions or treatments.
- Bacterial conjunctivitis is being treated with antibiotics and does not begin to improve after 24 hours of treatment.