

Conjunctivitis

Conjunctivitis, commonly known as pink eye, is an inflammation or infection of the thin, clear membrane that lines your eyelid and part of your eyeball. Conjunctivitis spreads easily from person to person, but is not a serious medical problem if it is diagnosed and treated early.

The symptoms of pink eye differ based on the cause of the inflammation, but may include:

- Redness in the white of the eye or inner eyelid
- Increased amount of tears
- Thick yellow, green or white discharge from the eye
- Itchiness, burning or a gritty feeling in one or both eyes
- Blurred vision
- Increased sensitivity to light

If you have any of these symptoms, you should see a doctor. Early treatment of the infection will help avoid more serious problems and prevent the infection from spreading to other people. Your doctor will examine your eye and may use a cotton swab to collect a sample of fluid from the eye to be sent to a lab for further analysis. These tests will help your doctor identify whether you have pink eye and identify the appropriate treatment.

Pink eye is caused by a number of factors – bacteria, allergies, irritants or viruses – and will generally clear up within several days, either on its own or with treatment. Treatment depends on the cause of the irritation. For a bacterial infection, your doctor may prescribe antibiotics, in the form of eye drops, ointments or pills. With proper treatment, bacterial infections should go away within a week. To prevent the infection from recurring, be sure to take all of the medication your doctor prescribes, even if symptoms go away.

If irritants are causing conjunctivitis, wash the eye with water for several minutes. Once the irritant is flushed from the eye, pink eye symptoms should improve within a few hours. If the pink eye is caused by an acid or a substance such as bleach, call your doctor to prevent a more serious problem. Similarly, pink eye that is caused by allergens should improve once the allergen is removed. Call your doctor if allergens are causing conjunctivitis. For viral infections, patients must wait until the symptoms of pink eye subside. Certain forms of pink eye, caused by sexually transmitted diseases such as chlamydia and gonorrhea, are more serious and can cause loss of eyesight.

Pink eye can be an irritating and painful condition, but you can take steps to alleviate the symptoms. First, protect your eyes from dust, dirt and other irritants. Don't wear eye makeup or contacts, and throw away any disposable contact lenses that may be infected. Eye drops may alleviate itching and burning. Remember to avoid using the same bottle of eye drops on eyes that are not infected.

If you have pink eye, avoid touching or rubbing your eye. Wash your hands often, and flush your eye with water several times a day. Pink eye can be contagious for up to two weeks. To avoid spreading the infection to someone else, don't share washcloths, towels, sheets or pillows. Children who have pink eye should stay home from school until they are no longer contagious.