

Conjunctivitis (“Pink Eye”)

What is conjunctivitis?

Conjunctivitis is an inflammation (swelling) of the conjunctiva – the thin layer that lines the inside of the eyelid and covers the white part of the eye. It is often called “pink eye” because it can cause the white of the eye to become pink or red.

What causes conjunctivitis?

Conjunctivitis is most commonly caused by viruses, bacteria, or allergens. It can also be caused by chemicals, fungi, contact lens use, and certain diseases.

What are the signs and symptoms?

- Pinkness or redness of the white part of the eye(s) – often one eye if bacterial; both eyes if viral or allergic)
- Eye discharge:
 - Thick; white or yellow – more common for bacterial conjunctivitis
 - Watery and clear – more common for viral or allergic conjunctivitis
- Itching, pain, irritation, or burning
- Crusting of eyelids or lashes, particularly in the morning

When to seek medical care:

- Moderate to severe eye pain or intense redness
- Vision problems, such as sensitivity to light or blurred vision, that persist
- Symptoms occur in a person with a weakened immune system (HIV infection, cancer treatment)

How is conjunctivitis diagnosed?

Your healthcare provider can usually diagnose conjunctivitis based on your symptoms and recent history. She may collect a swab of the discharge from your eye(s) for laboratory testing.

How is conjunctivitis treated?

Artificial tears and cold compresses may be used to relieve dryness and swelling. Medications and other treatments depend on the cause:

- Viral:
 - Often clears up on its own after 7-14 days
 - Your healthcare provider may prescribe antiviral medication if necessary
- Bacterial:
 - Your healthcare provider may prescribe antibiotic eye drops or ointment
 - Infection should clear within several days
- Allergic:
 - Allergy medication and certain eye drops (topical antihistamines and vasoconstrictors) can provide relief of symptoms

Prevent the spread of conjunctivitis:

- Allergic conjunctivitis is not contagious; however, viral or bacterial conjunctivitis is easily spread person to person
- Avoid rubbing or touching your eyes. Use a tissue to wipe away drainage, throw it away and wash your hands afterwards
- Clean your hands often with soap and water
- Avoid sharing make-up, eye drops, towels, and pillows.