

Conjunctivitis (Pink Eye) Fact Sheet

What is conjunctivitis?

Conjunctivitis, also known as “pink eye”, is one of the most common and treatable eye conditions in children and adults. It is an inflammation of the thin, clear lining inside the eyelid and on the white of the eye. This inflammation gives the eye a pink or reddish color.

What are the different types of 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. Antibiotics will not improve viral conjunctivitis-these drugs are not effective against viruses. In addition, rubella, measles, chickenpox, and Hib disease have conjunctivitis associated as a symptom.

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

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. Conjunctivitis caused by allergens is not contagious; however, viral and bacterial conjunctivitis can be easily spread from person to person and can cause epidemics. Infection typically occurs through direct contact or through contamination of hands followed by touching the infected eye.

What are the symptoms of conjunctivitis?

Symptoms are redness, irritation, itchiness, which may produce lots of tears. There is clear or yellow discharge that may make the eyelids stick together, especially in the morning, and swelling of the eyelids. Symptoms of a more severe eye infection include: severe eye pain, change in vision, extreme sensitivity to light and marked heat and swelling of the eyelids.

When should I see a doctor?

See a doctor if the eye discharge is yellow, if the eye or eyelid is red, or if the symptoms don’t start improving after 2-3 days. See a doctor immediately if the symptoms suggest a more severe infection. Doctors can prescribe an eye medication depending on the cause of the infection. Keeping the eyelid clean and lubricating the eye with drops may decrease discomfort until the infection is gone.

When can my child return to school?

Children should be excluded from school and child care settings until cleared by a health care professional with a note stating that the condition is not contagious, after taking antibiotics for 24 hours if the eye condition is contagious, or until symptoms have resolved.