

Conjunctivitis

Conjunctivitis, commonly called 'pink eye,' is an inflammation of the conjunctiva. The white of your eye is covered by the conjunctiva, a thin, filmy membrane that produces lubrication for the surface of your eye. When it becomes irritated or inflamed, the blood vessels enlarge and become much more prominent, and the eye turns very pink or red, thus 'pink eye.'

There are three common types of conjunctivitis...

- ♦ Viral – most often is seen with an upper respiratory tract infection, cold or sore throat
- ♦ Allergic – occurs most often to patients who have allergies and is usually seasonal
- ♦ Bacterial – often caused by staphylococcus or streptococcus; severity depends on the type of bacteria involved

Both viral and bacterial conjunctivitis is contagious. Only the allergic type of conjunctivitis is not contagious.

Symptoms

The symptoms of conjunctivitis may vary, depending on which type you have; however, all types have in common eye irritation, tearing and the associated redness.

The symptoms of viral conjunctivitis usually begin in one eye, but easily spreads to the other eye. In addition to tearing, there may be a watery discharge.

Allergic conjunctivitis usually affects both eyes and includes itching of the eyes and swollen eyelids.

Bacterial conjunctivitis normally has the most severe symptoms and is the type of conjunctivitis that most people remember having as a child. There is a discharge that may cause the lids to stick together, especially after sleeping. Swelling of the conjunctiva and a gritty feeling may also accompany the common symptoms. Bacterial conjunctivitis usually affects only one eye, but easily spreads to the unaffected eye.

Not all red or pink eyes symptoms indicate conjunctivitis. If you experience the symptoms of conjunctivitis, please call us immediately for an appointment. Several serious eye diseases also cause reddened eyes and can lead to blindness if not diagnosed and treated promptly. If pain, blurred vision or sensitivity to light are present along with reddened eyes, you may have glaucoma, an ulcer of the eye or an inflammation of the eye.

Causes

Many different sources of eye irritation can cause conjunctivitis, including infections, environmental irritants such as smoke and fumes, and allergies to drugs, perfume and cosmetics.

Treatment

Regardless of the type, conjunctivitis requires medical attention. For mild cases of allergic conjunctivitis, we will prescribe cool compresses and artificial tears to relieve the discomfort. For more severe cases, we may prescribe non-steroidal anti-inflammatory medications and antihistamines.

If bacterial conjunctivitis is suspected, we may take cultures to determine the type of bacteria that is causing the conjunctivitis. The appropriate treatment depends on the cause of the problem. Bacterial conjunctivitis is usually treated with antibiotic eye drops or ointments.

Because we currently have no cures for viruses, there is no cure for viral conjunctivitis. The best we can do is relieve the symptoms. Cool compresses and artificial tears will ease most of your discomfort. For more severe symptoms, we may prescribe topical steroid drops to ease inflammation. Viral conjunctivitis can take up to three weeks to go away.

The most important thing to remember with bacterial and viral conjunctivitis is that it's contagious. You will need to take precautions to avoid spreading the infection to your other eye and to friends, family and coworkers. Be careful not to allow others to handle items such as doorknobs, phones, eating and cooking utensils, towels, washcloths, etc. after you. Disinfect surfaces with diluted bleach solution and wash all washable items with soap and hot water. Use disposable tissues instead of handkerchiefs, and dispose of them immediately. Don't swim or use a hottub, because some bacteria can spread in water. Avoid touching your face or your eyes, and wash your hands frequently. Don't share cosmetics with anyone or shake hands with anyone.