

# Viral or Bacterial Conjunctivitis

## What is conjunctivitis?

Conjunctivitis is inflammation of the conjunctiva. The conjunctiva is the clear membrane that lines the eyelids and covers the white of the eye. Conjunctivitis is sometimes called pink eye.

## How does it occur?

Conjunctivitis can be caused by many things, including infection by viruses or bacteria. Viruses that cause colds may lead to conjunctivitis. Some bacteria that cause conjunctivitis are chlamydia, staphylococci, and streptococci. Severe conjunctivitis, such as that caused by gonococci, can cause blindness.

Viral and bacterial forms of conjunctivitis can be spread easily from person to person. They can be spread by coughing or sneezing. Bacteria or viruses can get in your eyes through contact with contaminated objects, including:

- hands
- washcloths or towels
- cosmetics
- false eyelashes
- soft contact lenses.

## What are the symptoms?

Symptoms may include:

- itchy or scratchy eyes
- redness
- sensitivity to light
- swelling of eyelids
- watery discharge
- discharge of pus.

## How is it diagnosed?

Your health care provider will ask about your medical history and if you have been near someone who has conjunctivitis. Your provider will examine your eyes. He or she will also check for enlarged lymph nodes near your ear and jaw. If the conjunctivitis appears to be caused by bacteria, your provider may get lab tests of a sample of the pus to see what type of bacteria are present.

## How is it treated?

Like a cold, viral conjunctivitis will usually go away on its own, even without treatment. However, your health care provider may prescribe eyedrops to help control your symptoms. Antihistamine pills may also relieve the itching and redness.

If you have bacterial conjunctivitis, your health care provider will prescribe antibiotic eyedrops. You can also help your eyes get better by washing them gently to remove any pus or crusts. Then dry them gently with a clean towel.

For very severe forms of conjunctivitis, antibiotics may need to be given with a shot or an IV (intravenous).

If you wear contact lenses, you will need to stop wearing them until your eyes are healed. The combination of contacts and conjunctivitis may damage your cornea (the clear outer layer on the front of your eye) and cause severe vision problems.

## How long will the effects last?

Viral conjunctivitis usually gets worse 5 to 7 days after the first symptoms. It can improve in 10 days to 1 month. If only one eye is affected at first, it may take up to 2 weeks for the other eye to be affected. Usually, if both eyes are affected, the first eye has worse conjunctivitis than the second.

Bacterial conjunctivitis should improve within 2 days after you begin using antibiotics. If your eyes are not better after 3 days of antibiotics, call your health care provider.

## How can I prevent conjunctivitis?

To keep from getting conjunctivitis from someone who has it, or to keep from spreading it to others, follow these guidelines:

- Wash your hands frequently. Do not touch or rub your eyes.
- Never share eye makeup or cosmetics with anyone. Also, if lab results show that you have conjunctivitis, throw out eye makeup you have been using.
- Never use eye medicine that has been prescribed for someone else.
- Do not share towels, washcloths, or sheets with anyone. If one of your eyes is affected but not the other, use a separate towel for each eye.
- Avoid swimming in swimming pools if you have conjunctivitis.

Avoid close contact with people until you have used the antibiotics for 24 hours and if your eye does not have a lot of pus. Children can return to school or day care after they have had 24 hours of antibiotic treatment.

## When should I call my health care provider?

Call your health care provider if:

- You have any severe eye pain.
- Your symptoms do not improve after you have used your medicine for 3 days.
- Your eyes become very sensitive to light, even up to a few weeks after the redness is gone.

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