

Conjunctivitis

Brown Health Services Patient Education Series

What is conjunctivitis?

Conjunctivitis (pink eye) is a condition in which the mucosal membrane that extends over the eyeball and underneath the eyelids becomes inflamed, causing symptoms of redness, irritation, itching and possible discharge.

What causes it?

There are several causes of conjunctivitis:

- Bacterial (e.g. from an infectious cause)
- Viral (e.g. from cold viruses)
- Allergic (e.g. from hay fever)
- Chemical (e.g. from lab chemical fumes)

It is sometimes difficult to differentiate the causes of conjunctivitis and your medical provider may need to prescribe more than one treatment before the cause is pinpointed. Sometimes conjunctivitis is also difficult to distinguish from traumatic contact lens irritation.

How is it treated?

Your medical provider may prescribe antibiotic ointment or drops if s/he suspects that the conjunctivitis is secondary to a bacterial infection. Use this medication as directed. You may also apply warm, water-soaked gauze compresses 3 or 4 times per day over the affected eye(s) for 10 to 15 minutes each time. This helps with the healing process.

Conjunctivitis due to a cold virus will go away by itself after a few days. If you are diagnosed as having allergic conjunctivitis, your provider may prescribe antihistamines to take orally and/or in eye drop form. Use the medication as directed. Cool

water-soaked gauze compresses over your eyes may be soothing in this case.

When should I be concerned about an eye infection?

The following symptoms may suggest a problem more serious than simple conjunctivitis:

- Deep, severe eye pain, or inability to move the eye to look in all directions.
- Extreme sensitivity to light
- Sensation of having a foreign body in the eye
- Change in vision

Contact your medical provider or make a same day appointment:

- If any of the above symptoms develop
- If your symptoms are not improving 48 hours after beginning treatment
- If symptoms have not gone away completely in 1 week

How do I put drops or ointment in my eyes?

- Wash your hands.
- Tilt your head back.
- Pull the lower eyelid downward.

Eye drops: squeeze the prescribed number of the drops into the center of the inner lower lid.

Ointment: apply a thin line of ointment along the inside of the lower lid from the nose to the outer corner of the lid.

- Close your eye gently for a few minutes.
- Do not squeeze the eyelid tightly shut as this may expel some of the medication.

Always wash your hands before and after touching your eyes. This is the most important aspect of eye care.

How can it be prevented?

- Try not to rub your eyes since viral and bacterial conjunctivitis are contagious.
- Wash your hands frequently.
- Don't share towels, face cloths, pillows or eye makeup.
- If you have used eye makeup during the infection, throw it away! The makeup may be contaminated and re-infect your eyes.
- Contact lenses should **not** be worn for at least 1 week if you have acute conjunctivitis. Then the lenses and case should be disinfected twice before you use them again. If disposable lenses are used, discard the ones worn when infection was diagnosed and use a new pair.