

CONJUNCTIVITIS FACT SHEET

What is conjunctivitis?

Conjunctivitis is an inflammation (swelling) of the conjunctiva, the thin layer that lines the white part of the eye and the inside of the eyelid. Conjunctivitis is often called “pink eye” because it can cause the white part of the eye to appear pink or red color. It is commonly caused by an infection of the eye with a virus or certain bacteria or an allergic reaction, such as to pollen, dust mites, molds, pet dander, or cosmetics. Less common causes include contact lenses and smoke.

Who can get conjunctivitis?

Anyone. Bacterial conjunctivitis is more common in children than adults and is a leading cause of children being absent from school. Allergic conjunctivitis occurs more frequently among people with other allergic conditions, such as hay fever, asthma, and eczema.

What are the symptoms of conjunctivitis?

Symptoms of conjunctivitis include the following:

- Pink or red color in the white of the eye(s)
- Swelling of the conjunctiva
- Increased tear production
- Feeling like a foreign body is in the eye(s) or an urge to rub the eye(s)
- Itching, irritation or burning
- Discharge (pus or mucus)
- Crusting of eyelids or lashes, especially in the morning

Bacterial conjunctivitis usually begins on one eye and spreads to the other eye, causes a discharge of pus (often yellow-green) and sometimes occurs with an ear infection. Viral conjunctivitis usually begins with one eye and may spread to the other eye, causes a watery discharge and can occur with symptoms of a cold, flu or other respiratory infection. Allergic conjunctivitis usually occurs in both eyes, causes intense itching and may occur with allergy symptoms, such as an itchy nose, sneezing, a scratchy throat or asthma.

Can conjunctivitis be spread?

Viral and bacterial conjunctivitis (pink eye) can spread easily from person to person. Allergic conjunctivitis does not spread from person to person.

How is conjunctivitis treated?

For bacterial conjunctivitis your health care provider may prescribe antibiotics, which are usually given as eye drops or ointment. There is no specific treatment for viral conjunctivitis and it usually lasts 7–14 days. Allergic conjunctivitis usually improves once the source of the allergy is removed from your environment.

How can the spread of conjunctivitis be prevented?

If you have conjunctivitis, throw away the following items if they were used while your eyes were infected to avoid re-infection:

- Eye or face makeup
- Contact lens solutions
- Disposable contact lenses and cases

You should also clean extended wear lenses as directed and any eyeglasses and cases that you used.

If you are around someone with conjunctivitis, follow these steps to reduce your risk of infection:

- Wash your hands frequently with soap and water, scrubbing your hands for at least 20 seconds
- Wash your hands after contact with the infected person or items they use
- Avoid touching your eyes with unwashed hands
- Do not share items used by the infected person, including pillows, washcloths, towels, contact lens containers, and eyeglasses

Should a person with conjunctivitis stay home from school/daycare?

A child with bacterial or viral conjunctivitis should not attend school until symptoms resolve or until 24 hours after treatment has started.

Where can I get more information?

Information about conjunctivitis and other related health topics can be found at www.cdc.gov. The DC Department of Health promotes the health and safety of the District residents. For additional information, please visit www.dchealth.dc.gov or call (202) 442-9371.