

Conjunctivitis

Eye burning, itching and discharge usually means conjunctivitis – which is an inflammation of the membrane that lines the eyes and the inside of the eyelids. The cause may be an environmental irritant (e.g., smog, cigarette smoke, swimming pool chlorine), an allergy to something in the air (e.g., pollens), or an infection (viral or bacterial).

Symptoms

- Symptoms of infection include eye redness and a discharge that may crust over and “glue” the eye (s) shut upon waking. If the white of the eye is red and there is little or no discharge, or there is only a watery discharge it’s a viral infection (sometimes called “pink eye”) Viral infections usually affect both eyes.
- If there is a thick discharge and only one eye is involved, it’s probably a bacterial infection. This can be serious and must be treated as soon as possible.
- Infectious conjunctivitis (either viral or bacterial) is highly contagious.

Home Treatment

- If a physical, chemical, or allergic irritant is the cause of the symptoms, avoid the irritant to the extent possible (e.g., avoid smoke-filled rooms, find a new home for your pets, close your windows during pollen season, etc.).
- If pollen is the problem, antihistamines (over the counter or prescription) may relieve some eye redness and itching.
Because antihistamines cause drowsiness, you may want to take them only at bedtime.
- If one or both eyes are slightly pink, and there is little or no discharge, suspect “pink eye” (antibiotic eye drops are not effective for viral infections). Watch and wait. Don’t touch or rub the eyes. Use warm compresses for relief.
- Over-the-counter eye drops (Murine, Visine, etc.) can soothe minor eye irritants, but they cannot cure conjunctivitis.
- If the white area of one or both eyes is bright red; if the discharge is greenish, or yellow-green; or if you have eye pain or a problem with vision, call the doctor.

What To Expect At The Doctor’s Office

- The doctor will check your vision, eye motion, eyelids, and the reaction of the pupil to light. Antihistamines (for allergy), or antibiotic eye drops or ointments (for bacterial conjunctivitis) may be prescribed.
- Antibiotic eye drops or ointments cannot cure viral conjunctivitis – “pink eye”. However, doctors sometimes prescribe antibiotic drops or ointments as a preventative measure, in case a bacterial infection decides to follow the viral infection.
- If your doctor says the infection is contagious, you should avoid touching your eyes

until the redness starts to disappear or the discharge is gone. If you inadvertently touch your eyes, be sure to wash your hands immediately so that you do not spread the infection to others. If eye drops or ointment have been prescribed, wash your hands before and after applying the medicine.

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