

# **Conjunctivitis**

(pinkeye)

## ***What is it?***

It's an inflammation of the clear membrane that covers the white part of the eye and lines the inside surface of the eyelids. It is a fairly common condition and may lead to damage if left untreated.

## ***What causes it?***

Bacteria or viral infections can cause it. The organisms that cause gonorrhea and chlamydia can also infect the eyes and cause conjunctivitis. This type of eye infection occurs in sexually active people and in newborns who acquire the infection at birth from their mothers. Viral conjunctivitis is also common and can occur during a common cold or flu. Less common but more serious conjunctivitis is caused by herpes simplex infection.

Newborns also get conjunctivitis, which can be serious. The bacteria causing Chlamydia and gonorrhea can pass from an infected mother to a baby during delivery.

## ***What are the symptoms?***

The different types of conjunctivitis have different symptoms. One of the most common symptoms is discomfort or pain, which may feel like having sand in your eye. Many people have redness of the eye and inner eyelid as well; this redness has led people to call conjunctivitis by its other common name, pinkeye. You may also have swollen eyelids and be sensitive to bright light.

Discharge and tearing from the eyes is another symptom. In bacterial conjunctivitis, the discharge is kind of thick and white, yellow, or green. Sometimes the discharge causes the eyelids to stick together when you wake up in the morning.

## ***Is it contagious?***

You bet!! All types of infectious conjunctivitis are contagious and can spread from one eye to the other by touching the eyes. A person can become infected from direct contact with someone who has the infection or something that person has touched, such as a used tissue or a door knob.

## ***Sounds terrible...how can I prevent it?***

To prevent conjunctivitis, wash your hands often with warm water and soap. Avoid sharing eyedrops, tissues, eye makeup, washcloths, towels, or pillowcases with other people.

If you already have it, wash your hands after touching your eyes. Don't touch an infected eye and then touch the other eye without first washing your hands, and throw away gauze or cotton balls after use to avoid contamination. Also, throw away all eye makeup and contact lenses if you develop an infection.

## ***How long will it last? How long will I last without eye makeup?***

Bacterial conjunctivitis lasts about a week. Viral conjunctivitis can last for 2 weeks or longer. Sorry.

## ***How is it treated?***

For most cases of bacterial conjunctivitis there are prescription antibiotic drops or ointment for the eyes. The ointment is thick and may blur vision for a short time. Medication is usually given for about 1-2 weeks. Although viral infections typically do not require antibiotics, eyedrops or ointment may be given to prevent an additional bacterial infection or because it might be hard to know whether the infection is bacterial or viral.

You can clean the edges of the infected eye carefully with warm water and gauze or cotton balls. That will also help to remove the crusts of dried discharge that may cause the eyelids to stick together when you wake up in the morning.

*A service of the Klotz Student Health Center's Health Promotion Dept.*

For more information,  
please call 818 677-3666 or 677-3692 (tty)

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