

Conjunctivitis

Symptoms

Conjunctivitis is an inflammation of the thin clear layer on the white of the eyes (conjunctiva) and is sometimes called 'pink eye'.

The eyes and eyelids may be:

- red, itchy or irritated
- puffy or swollen
- watery with clear tears or have a yellowy discharge that becomes sticky and crusty
- sensitive to light.

Your pharmacist will ask you further questions to determine the likely cause of the conjunctivitis and then suggest the best treatment options.

You should see a doctor if:

- pain is severe, or you have reduced or loss of vision
- you have recently: returned from overseas, had eye surgery, glaucoma, used eye drops or worn contact lenses
- exposure to bright lights causes pain
- the eye has been injured or a foreign object might be present
- the eyelid and surrounding skin is markedly swollen, red and very sore
- there is a large amount of coloured discharge
- you are working in a metal or welding environment
- your baby is under 2 years of age and has severe eye inflammation.

Causes

Inflammation of the eye can be caused by:

- **Bacterial inflammation** which may start in one eye but will usually spread to both eyes. There is likely to be a gritty feeling and a thick colored discharge.
- **Viral inflammation** which may involve one or both eyes, causing red itchy and watery eyes.
- **Allergic inflammation** which often occurs with symptoms of hay fever including itchy nose and sneezing, itchy eyes with a clear discharge (see *Hay fever* Health Information Brochure).
- **Irritation** caused by exposure to chemicals, smoke, or a foreign object which causes redness, irritation or pain.
- **Blocked tear duct** – Some babies are born with a blockage in the tear duct which stops fluid draining away to the nose. These tear ducts will usually function normally within one year of age without needing any treatment.

Lifestyle options

Conjunctivitis that is viral or bacterial can be spread very easily by a person touching the fluid discharging from an infected eye and then transferring the infection to their uninfected eye or other people. Careful hand washing with soap and water is the best way to stop the spread of infectious conjunctivitis. Children and adults with conjunctivitis should stay away from school, child care or work until the infection has resolved.

Cleaning sore eyes:

- Wash hands with soap and warm water before and after cleaning.
- Use a separate clean face towel or tissue for each eye. Don't share personal items such as face cloths, towels, or make-up items. Dispose of used tissues carefully.
- Use warm (not hot) water, or saline solution from a pharmacy.

- Wipe the closed eye gently but firmly to remove the excess exudate – do not clean inside the eyelids or touch the surface of the eye as this can cause damage to the conjunctiva or the cornea.

If a chemical accidentally spills on the eye, wash immediately with copious amounts of free-flowing tap water and then seek medical assistance.

Pharmacy options

Always inform pharmacy staff if you are taking any other medicines, or if you have any other health conditions, because some over-the-counter medicines may not be suitable for you.

Conjunctivitis will often clear without treatment, however after talking with your pharmacist, they might recommend treatment in some circumstances:

Bacterial Conjunctivitis may need an antibacterial medicine:

- *Chloramphenicol* eye drops or ointment are Pharmacist-Only-Medicines and your pharmacist will advise on their use.

Viral conjunctivitis will generally get better on its own. Gentle cleaning of the eyes may help them feel less irritated. Lubricant eye drops or gels can help to soothe symptoms.

Allergic conjunctivitis will generally improve with an antihistamine treatment which can relieve itching and a decongestant medicine may be added to relieve any redness.

Tips for using eye drops and ointments:

- Ask your pharmacist to show you the correct way to use an eye dropper or apply eye ointment. Pictures or videos are also available on the internet.
- Wait 5 minutes between applying each eye drop.
- Discard any unused products one month after opening.
- Never touch the product container to the eye, or share eye medicines.

Ask your pharmacist for advice on the most suitable treatment for you.

More information

Health Direct: www.healthdirect.gov.au

MyDr: www.mydr.com.au/eye-health/conjunctivitis

Disclaimer: The information provided is a guide only, is current at time of publishing, and is not intended to replace the advice of your pharmacist or doctor.

IN EMERGENCIES DIAL 000.