

# Infection Prevention and You



## What is conjunctivitis?

Conjunctivitis, also known as pink eye, occurs when the conjunctiva (the white part of the eyeball and the inner eye lid) is irritated by an infection or allergies. Conjunctivitis is highly contagious and can be caused by several different types of viruses and bacteria. It can occur with colds or symptoms of a respiratory infection, such as a sore throat. Wearing contact lenses that aren't cleaned properly, or aren't your own, can cause bacterial conjunctivitis.

## How does conjunctivitis spread?

Conjunctivitis is most often spread through direct contact with the eye by hands or objects that are contaminated with the virus or bacteria. It can also spread via respiratory tract droplets. Allergic conjunctivitis is not contagious.

## Who is at risk for contracting conjunctivitis?

Persons who are most at risk for contracting conjunctivitis are those with exposure to someone infected with viral or bacterial conjunctivitis, contact with a known allergic irritant, and contact lens wearers. Outbreaks of conjunctivitis are common with children in daycare and school settings.

## What are the symptoms of conjunctivitis?

Conjunctivitis can occur in one or both eyes. Symptoms of conjunctivitis include: redness, itchiness, a gritty feeling, excessive tearing, or a discharge that forms a crust that may prevent your eye or eyes from opening in the morning.

## How is conjunctivitis treated?

Treatment for conjunctivitis is typically focused on symptom relief. Artificial tears and eye compresses may alleviate symptoms. Contact lens wearers may need to stop wearing contacts until the infection resolves. Antibiotic eye drops are typically not needed as most cases of conjunctivitis are caused by a virus; however, they may be prescribed for infections suspected to be caused by bacteria or herpes simplex virus. Allergic conjunctivitis may be treated with medications that help control allergic reactions, such as antihistamines and mast cell stabilizers, or drugs that help control inflammation, such as decongestants, steroids, and anti-inflammatory drops. While conjunctivitis can cause unpleasant symptoms and unsightly discharge, it is typically not a serious infection and resolves without long term effects.

## How can you prevent conjunctivitis?

Conjunctivitis can be prevented by practicing diligent hand hygiene, avoiding touching your eyes with your hands, using a clean towel and washcloth daily, avoiding sharing of towels or washcloths, washing or changing pillowcases often, and avoiding sharing eye cosmetics or personal eye care items.

Using conscientious hand hygiene when handling contact lenses and discarding disposable contact lenses as recommended can also prevent conjunctivitis. It is also important to stay home from school and work until eye discharge has resolved to prevent spreading the infection to others.

## Additional resources

- The CDC—Symptoms of conjunctivitis <https://www.cdc.gov/conjunctivitis/about/symptoms.html>
- American Optometric Association—Conjunctivitis <https://www.aoa.org/patients-and-public/eye-and-vision-problems/glossary-of-eye-and-vision-conditions/conjunctivitis>
- Mayo Clinic—Pink eye <https://www.mayoclinic.org/diseases-conditions/pink-eye/symptoms-causes/syc-20376355>