

Conjunctivitis (Pink Eye)

What is conjunctivitis?

Conjunctivitis is the term used by eye doctors to describe inflammation of the conjunctiva, the white part of the eye. In ordinary terms, conjunctivitis is simply the most common cause of red or “pink” eye.

What causes conjunctivitis?

The most common causes of conjunctivitis are:

- Infections
- Allergies
- Environmental irritants

Infectious causes of conjunctivitis include bacteria and viruses. Bacterial infections, such as staphylococcus or streptococcus, cause a red eye which is associated with considerable amounts of discharge. If the amount of discharge from the eye is significant, an acute infection is likely, and prompt consultation with your family eye doctor is advisable.

Some bacterial infections are more chronic (long-term) and may produce little or no discharge except for some mild crusting of the eyelashes in the morning. There are different treatment regimens depending on the severity of the bacterial infection.

Viruses are also common causes of conjunctivitis. Some viruses produce the familiar red eyes, sore throat, and runny nose of a common cold. Viral conjunctivitis usually produces a watery discharge and lasts from one to two weeks.

Infectious conjunctivitis, whether bacterial or viral, can be quite contagious, so contact with the patient’s tears through handkerchiefs and towels should be avoided. Handwashing after contact with the patient helps to prevent spread of the infection.

Allergies, like hay fever, make the eyes very itchy, while others may merely produce a chronic redness. Finally, environmental irritants such as smoke or fumes may cause more short-term episodes of conjunctivitis.

What are other causes of red eyes?

There are several eye diseases which also produce a red eye and can lead to blindness unless recognized and treated. It is important to avoid confusing them with conjunctivitis, so *a thorough evaluation of a red eye is always a good idea*. This is especially important if pain, blurred vision, or severe light sensitivity are present, since these symptoms are not typically found in simple conjunctivitis. Pain, blurred vision, or severe light sensitivity may signal the presence of glaucoma, an ulcer of the eye, or an inflammation of the inside of the eye.

How is conjunctivitis treated?

Depending on the cause of the red eye, your family eye doctor may prescribe antibiotics or antiallergy medication to treat the conjunctivitis. There is no effective treatment for viral conjunctivitis, so your doctor may not prescribe any medications and let nature take its course. The only way to accurately diagnose the cause of conjunctivitis is to see your family eye doctor for a thorough examination.