

Conjunctivitis (Pink Eye)



WHAT IS "PINK EYE"?

Pink eye, or conjunctivitis, is redness and inflammation of the membranes (conjunctiva) covering the whites of the eyes and the membranes on the inner part of the eyelids. These membranes react to a wide range of bacteria, viruses, allergy-provoking agents, irritants, and toxic agents, as well as to underlying diseases within the body. Viral and bacterial forms of conjunctivitis are common in childhood, but they can occur in people of any age. Overall however, there are many causes of pink eye. These can be classified as either infectious or noninfectious.

WHAT INFECTIONS CAUSE PINK EYE, WHAT ARE INFECTIOUS PINK EYE SYMPTOMS, AND HOW ARE THEY TREATED?

Viral Pink Eye

The leading cause of a red, inflamed eye is virus infection. A number of different viruses can be responsible for the infection. Viral pink eye symptoms are usually associated with more of a watery discharge that is not green or yellow in color. Often, viral "cold-like" symptoms, such as sinus congestion and runny nose, are also present. The eyelids may be swollen. Sometimes looking at bright lights is painful. While viral pink eye may not require an antibiotic, those affected should see a doctor, as occasionally this form of pink eye can be associated with infection of the cornea (the clear portion of the front of the eyeball). This infection must be correctly detected and treated. Viral pink eye is highly contagious. Viral pink eye usually resolves in seven to 10 days after symptoms appear.

Bacterial Pink Eye

The bacteria that most commonly cause infectious pink eye are *staphylococci*, *pneumococci*, and *streptococci*. Bacterial pink eye symptoms include:

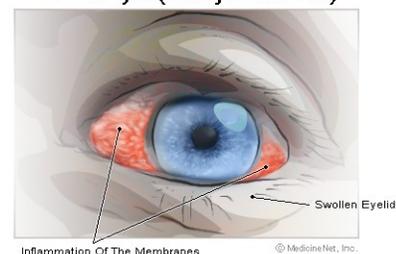
- eye pain,
- swelling,
- redness, and
- a moderate to large amount of discharge, usually yellow or greenish in color.

The discharge commonly accumulates after sleeping. Affected children may awaken most unhappy that their "eyes are stuck shut," requiring a warm washcloth applied to the eyes to remove the discharge. Bacterial pink eye is treated by repeated warm washcloths applied to the eyes (try applying these to your child's eye one eye at a time during a favorite video) and requires antibiotic eyedrops or ointment prescribed by the doctor.

WHAT DOES PINK EYE LOOK LIKE?

Be careful not to use medication prescribed for someone else, or from an old infection, as these may be inappropriate for your current infection or may have been contaminated from other infections by accidentally touching the medicine bottle to infected areas. A safe, effective, and "less scary for your child" method of putting drops into the eyes involves asking your child to lie down flat, with instructions to merely "close your eyes," and placing the recommended number of drops in the inner corner of the eye, next to the bridge of the nose, and letting them make a little "lake" there. When your child relaxes and opens the eyes, the medicine will flow gently into the infected mucous membranes without the need to "force open" the eyes.

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When you feel that you or your child might have bacterial pink eye, it is very important to see your doctor immediately for several reasons. First, if the cause is a bacterial infection, an antibiotic will be needed to help the infection-fighting immune system to kill this infection. Secondly, if you are experiencing other symptoms such as a runny nose, cough, earache, etc., there is a good chance that these symptoms are caused by the same bacteria, and an oral antibiotic may very well be needed to treat this infection along with the antibiotic drops or ointment for the eyes. Finally, your doctor will want to exclude the possibility that the infection has spread to areas where the symptoms may not yet be recognizable.

HOW CAN I PREVENT THE SPREAD OF PINK EYE?

Infectious forms of pink eye are highly contagious and are spread by direct contact with infected people. If you or your child has infectious pink eye, avoid touching the eye area and wash your hands frequently, particularly after applying medications to the eye area. Never share towels or handkerchiefs, and throw away tissues after each use. Disinfecting surfaces like countertops, sinks, and doorknobs can also help prevent the spread of infectious pink eye.

Pink Eye At A Glance

- Pink eye (conjunctivitis) can be due to infectious or noninfectious causes.
- Infectious pink eye is highly contagious.
- Infectious pink eye can be caused by bacteria or viruses.
- Avoiding contact with infected people, disinfection of household surfaces, and good hygienic practices can help prevent the spread of infectious pink eye.
- Noninfectious pink eye can be caused by allergy, chemical irritation, underlying inflammatory diseases, or trauma.