

What is conjunctivitis?

Conjunctivitis means the white of the eye (the sclera) is pink due to inflammation of the clear covering over it (the conjunctivae).

What are the causes of conjunctivitis?

Conjunctivitis can be caused by an infection (either viral or bacterial) which is highly contagious, or by an allergic reaction which is not contagious.

It is not always clear which type of conjunctivitis is present, because all cause redness and swelling of the conjunctiva.

What are the symptoms of conjunctivitis?

Viral or bacterial conjunctivitis usually develops within 24 to 72 hours of becoming infected, lasts from two days to three weeks, and remains contagious for as long as there is discharge from the eyes.

Viral Conjunctivitis may involve one or both eyes, causing red itchy eyes with a 'watery' discharge.

Bacterial Conjunctivitis almost always affects both eyes, although it may start in just one eye. There is likely to be a gritty feeling like sand in the eye and a thick yellow discharge that crusts over the eyelashes, especially after sleep.

Allergic Conjunctivitis is often accompanied with other signs of hay fever if the inflammation is the result of an allergy. Signs can include an itchy, runny nose and sneezing or a history of other allergic conditions. The eyes are itchy and watery.

Other symptoms can include:

- redness behind the eyelid, spreading up the white of the eye
- swelling of the eye/s making them appear puffy
- excessive tears
- a discharge, yellow or green in colour, causing crusting around the eyelids
- a dislike of bright lights (photophobia)



What does treatment involve?

Viral conjunctivitis

There is no specific treatment and it will get better on its own.

Bacterial conjunctivitis

This form of conjunctivitis may need antibiotic ointment or drops prescribed by a doctor. Treatment should be applied to both eyes, even if only one eye appears to be infected. Always treat the unaffected eye first.

Allergic conjunctivitis

Sore, inflamed eyes due to allergies may be helped by treatments used in conditions such as hay fever e.g. antihistamines. Cool compresses and lubricating eye drops may soothe the eyes.

How do I clean the eyes?

Gentle cleaning with cotton balls soaked in warm water. Wipe from the inside corner of the eye to the outside corner, dispose of cotton ball, and repeat with a clean cotton ball as necessary. **DO NOT** try to clean inside the eyelids as this may cause damage to the conjunctiva.

How did I get conjunctivitis?

Viral or bacterial conjunctivitis is highly contagious and spread from person to person, usually via hands, or contact with contaminated surfaces or objects.

You could develop conjunctivitis if you come into contact with:

- discharge from the eyes, nose or throat of an infected person through touch, coughing or sneezing
- contaminated fingers or objects
- contaminated water while swimming.

Allergic conjunctivitis occurs more commonly among people who already have seasonal allergies. They develop it when they come into contact with a substance that triggers an allergic reaction in their eyes or because of a foreign body.

How to stop the spread of contagious conjunctivitis?

- Wash your hands often, especially after touching your eye or face and after applying eye drops or ointment. Use soap and warm water or, if unavailable, alcohol-based hand rub that contains at least 60% alcohol.
- Throw away tissues that came into contact with the eye.
- Change your towel, face washer, pillowslip daily.



- Do not share your eye drops or ointment with anyone, even if they also have conjunctivitis.
- Do not share towels, face washers, pillows, eye-makeup or soap.
- Throw away eye-makeup and lash extensions used before or during infection.
- Do not wear eye makeup or lash extensions during an infection.
- Clean eyeglasses or cases used during the infection.
- Clean shared home/office surfaces or objects, e.g. taps, benchtops, phones, doorknobs, keyboard/mouse, with home disinfectant.

Contact Lenses

- Stop wearing contact lenses while the condition is active.
- Throw away any contact lens solution used during or before the symptoms.
- Disposable contact lenses should be thrown away.
- Re-usable or 'extended wear' contacts need to be cleaned as per the directions on the box they are purchased in.
- Replace your contact lens case.
- Clean eyeglasses or cases used during the infection.
- Do not wear new contacts until you have been symptom-free for one week.

If you developed conjunctivitis due to wearing contact lenses your eye doctor will discuss with you:

- the need to switch to a different type of contact lens
- the need to change the type of disinfection solution you use.

Things to remember

- You will be contagious as long as there is a discharge from your eye (usually 10-14 days after symptoms start).
- Do not attend work or school until discharge stops.

When to seek additional medical advice

- Severe pain or sensitivity to light.
- Decreased vision.
- Redness persisting more than 10-14 days.

You can speak with your doctor or health professional or access more information by searching the term "conjunctivitis" at www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au

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