

Pink Eye

Pink eye, or conjunctivitis, is a common problem, especially in school children. It happens when the conjunctiva — a thin, clear covering over the white part of the eye that also covers the inside of the eyelids — gets infected.

You'll probably know you have pink eye if your eye turns a pink or red color. Your eye also may hurt or itch.

There are four types of pink eye common in the United States.

- **Viral conjunctivitis:** This is the leading cause of pink eye. It usually affects only one eye, but sometimes both eyes. Viral pink eye causes a lot of tearing and a light, watery, clear discharge. Sometimes, it causes eyelids to swell. Looking at bright lights can be painful. It can spread to other people very easily, especially in schools, workplaces and healthcare practitioner's offices. It usually lasts 8-10 days.

- **Bacterial conjunctivitis:** This condition affects both eyes. It causes eye pain, swelling of eyelids, redness in and around the eye and a heavy discharge that can be green or yellow. When a person sleeps, this discharge may build up and keep the eyelid from opening when they wake up. In most cases, it lasts 3-5 days.

- **Allergic conjunctivitis:** This condition usually affects both eyes and causes itching in the eyes and sometimes the nose. It also causes watery eyes and swollen eyelids. Like other allergies, this is more of a seasonal problem.

- **Giant papillary conjunctivitis (GPC):** This type of pink eye usually affects individuals who wear contact lenses. It also can result from prosthetics and stitches. Both eyes are usually irritated. GPC is not an infection, but a reaction from a foreign body (such as a contact lens) on the membrane covering the inner eyelids and the whites of the eyes. Symptoms include itching, a heavy discharge, watering of the eye and red bumps on the underside of the eyelids.

How Can I Stop the Spread of Pink Eye?

To avoid pink eye, keep your surroundings clean and stay away from a person who has pink eye. Pink eye is contagious and is spread by touching a person with pink eye, or items that person touched. An individual with pink eye also can spread it by coughing or sneezing. Here are some tips to avoid getting pink eye, or if you have pink eye, keeping others from getting it.

- Wash your hands often and don't touch or rub your eyes.
- Don't share washcloths, towels or pillowcases with anyone else and wash items after each use.
- Don't share eyedrops or makeup, such as eyeliner, eye shadow or mascara. If you have pink eye, replace the drops or makeup after your eyes are better to keep from getting pink eye again.
- If you have pink eye and wear contacts, your healthcare practitioner may recommend you replace them after your eyes are healed to avoid getting pink eye again.
- If you or someone in your house has pink eye, clean surfaces such as doorknobs and counters with watered-down bleach to disinfect them.
- If you have pink eye, don't swim (the bacteria can spread in the water), shake hands or use handkerchiefs (instead use tissues and throw them away).

To avoid allergic pink eye, keep windows and doors closed on days when

there is a lot of pollen in the air. Get fresh air if you're exposed to smoke, chemicals or fumes.

How Is Pink Eye Treated?

If you have pink eye, the type of treatment you'll receive will depend on the type of infection you have.

Viral: Much like the common cold, there is no cure, but symptoms usually can be relieved without a prescription. Instead, cool compresses and artificial tears can help relieve the symptoms. For the worst cases, topical steroid drops may be prescribed to reduce discomfort.

Allergic: Cool compresses and artificial tears sometimes help with itching and burning. If you have a more serious case, your healthcare practitioner may prescribe non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs and/or antihistamine pills or eye drops.

Bacterial: You may receive a prescription for antibiotic eye drops or ointments and, if there are other symptoms such as a runny nose, cough or earache, an antibiotic taken by mouth. If a discharge buildup occurs while you sleep and keeps you from opening your eye(s), place a warm washcloth on your eye(s) to get rid of the discharge.

GPC: You'll need to stop wearing your contact lenses for at least 3-4 weeks. Your eye healthcare practitioner also may ask you to switch to a different type of contact lens and cleaning solution to prevent the pink eye from happening again. Your eye healthcare practitioner may give you eye drops to relieve your symptoms.

How Do I Take the Medicine?

Drops

- Wipe the eyes off with a tissue or cotton ball dipped in warm water. Clean off the mucus and pus.
- Look up while you put in the medicine. If giving the medicine to an older child, warn him that it may burn for a few seconds.
- Gently pull the lower lid down. Put one drop in the pouch of the lower eye. Do not touch the dropper to the eye.
- If placing the drops in a young child's eye, it may be easier to have the child lie down on his back. With his eyes closed, place one drop in the corner of each eye. Pull the lids apart and tell the child to blink. The drops will run into the eyes.
- Wash your hands after the medicine has been given.

Ointment

- Gently pull the lower lid down. Put a line of ointment in the pink part of the lower lid (like making a line of glue). Do not touch the tube to the eye.
- If treating a child, it may be easier to put the ointment on while the child is lying down.
- Wash your hands after the medicine has been given.

Resources

All About Vision.com. (2005). *Eye problems and diseases: Conjunctivitis (pink eye)*. Retrieved Jan. 13, 2005 from the World Wide Web: <http://www.allaboutvision.com/conditions/conjunctivitis.htm>
University of Iowa's Virtual Hospital. (April 2002). *Pediatrics common questions, quick answers: Pink eye*. Retrieved Jan. 13, 2005 from the World Wide Web: <http://www.vh.org/pediatric/patient/pediatrics/cqqa/pinkeye.html>