
Conjunctivitis (Pink eye)

Frequently Asked Questions

What is Conjunctivitis?

Conjunctivitis, also known as pink eye, is an inflammation of the transparent membrane that lines the eyelid and the eyeball. This membrane is known as the conjunctiva. Within the conjunctiva, there are small blood vessels, which become swollen and irritated when the conjunctiva is inflamed, therefore appearing more visible and giving a reddish or pinkish appearance to the eye. This is why conjunctivitis is also known as "Pink eye". You can get conjunctivitis in one or both eyes. It may be possible to get conjunctivitis multiple times, however practicing good hand hygiene can reduce the risk of recurrence.

What are the symptoms of conjunctivitis?

People with conjunctivitis have a pink or red colour of the white of the eye/eyes. There is swelling of the conjunctiva and/or eyelids. Patients can also experience an increased tear production, itching, irritating or a burning sensation. There may be discharge (pus or mucus) as well as crusting of the eyelids or lashes (most commonly in the morning). Depending on the cause of the conjunctivitis, other symptoms may occur.

What causes conjunctivitis?

Conjunctivitis can be caused by viruses, bacteria, or by allergies. Bacterial and viral conjunctivitis can easily spread between persons, therefore highly contagious. Allergic conjunctivitis is not contagious.

- **Viral Conjunctivitis:**

There are many viral causes of conjunctivitis and include *Adenoviruses*, *Rubella virus*, *Measles virus*, *Herpesviruses*, and *Picornaviruses*. Viral conjunctivitis is very contagious and can result in large outbreaks depending on the virus. It can occur with symptoms of the cold, the flu or along with other respiratory symptoms. Generally, the conjunctivitis begins in one eye and may spread to the other eye within a few days. Discharge that is present from the eye is usually watery rather than thick.

- **Bacterial Conjunctivitis**

Many bacteria can cause conjunctivitis, this bacteria include *Staphylococcus aureus*,

Streptococcus pneumoniae, *Haemophilus influenzae* and *Chlamydia trachomatis*. It is more common in children than adults. This type of conjunctivitis is more commonly associated with a discharge that is pus like, which can lead to the eyelids sticking together. This may sometimes occur with an ear infection. Bacterial conjunctivitis can spread easily between person to person.

- Allergic Conjunctivitis

This is as a result of the body's reaction to allergens, such as pollen from trees, grasses, dust mites, dander from pets or certain medicines. This type of conjunctivitis is not contagious and occurs more frequently in people with hay fever, asthma, and eczema. Usually, it occurs in both eyes and can produce an intense itching, tearing, and swelling in the eyes.

How is conjunctivitis transmitted?

Viruses and bacteria that cause conjunctivitis can be very contagious. Each type of germ can be spread from person-person in different ways. Usually, germs can spread from an infected person to other people through close personal contact (this includes touching or shaking hands), from respiratory droplets through coughing or sneezing, as well as by touching surfaces that have been contaminated with germs, and then touching your eyes before washing your hands.

How is conjunctivitis diagnosed?

A doctor will be able to determine whether the cause of the conjunctivitis is a bacterium, virus or allergen, based on the history, symptoms, and examination. Although not routinely done, your doctor may collect a sample of eye discharge from the infected eye to test for the germ that is causing the conjunctivitis.

It is important to note that there may be other causes of the eye symptoms other than conjunctivitis. Your doctor will exclude the following causes that include, but are not limited to, chemical burns, iritis, uveitis, glaucoma and trachoma.

How is conjunctivitis treated?

Most cases of viral conjunctivitis are mild and usually clear up in 7 to 14 days without treatment but may take up to 2-3 weeks to clear up. Bacterial conjunctivitis may get better without treatment and often improves in 2-5 days, but can take up to 2 weeks to completely go away. Allergic conjunctivitis usually improves on removal of the allergen from the person's environment.

General management to relieve inflammation and dryness caused by conjunctivitis include the use of cold compresses and artificial tears (which can be obtained over the counter). Contact lenses should not be worn during the duration of symptoms. For serious forms of viral conjunctivitis, antiviral medication can be prescribed. For bacterial conjunctivitis, antibiotics can be prescribed to shorten the length of infection. Antibiotics may be necessary if the conjunctivitis is associated with a pus-like discharge, in people who have a compromised immune system and when certain bacteria are suspected. In allergic conjunctivitis, removing the allergen from the environment will result in improvement of symptoms. However, allergy medication can also be prescribed, and includes topic antihistamines. More information on the treatment is detailed in the Standard Conjunctivitis FAQ document March 2024

How to prevent conjunctivitis?

Practicing good hand hygiene is important. Disease spread can be limited by washing your hands regularly with soap and warm water for 20 seconds, especially before and after cleaning or applying eye drops to your infected eye. You may also use sanitizer with 60% alcohol to clean your hands if soap or water is not available. Avoid touching your eyes and face. Wash all pillowcases, sheets, washcloths, and towels in hot water with detergent. Do not share personal items such as pillows, makeup, or eyeglasses. Do not use swimming pools.

When to seek medical care?

If your conjunctivitis is associated with any of the following, further medical attention should be sought from a healthcare provider. These include pain in the eye, sensitivity to light or blurred vision that does not improve when discharge is wiped from the eye, intense redness in the eye, symptoms not improving (including bacterial conjunctivitis that does not improve with antibiotics after 24 hours), as well as if you have a weakened immune system (due to HIV infection, cancer treatment or other medical conditions).

For more information, you can contact:

The Outbreak Response Unit (for use by healthcare professionals only).

- Medical / clinical related queries: NICD Hotline +27 82 883 9920.
- Results inquiries: NICD Specimen Receiving Laboratory: +27 11 386 6404.