

Conjunctivitis

SELF CARE FORUM FACT SHEET NO. 21

This fact sheet helps you know what is normal and what you can expect to happen if you suffer from conjunctivitis, or red or pink eye. It also tells you when you should become concerned and seek advice from a health professional.

Useful facts

Conjunctivitis is an inflammation or infection of the transparent membrane (conjunctiva) that lines your eyelid and covers the white part of your eyeball.

When small blood vessels in the conjunctiva become inflamed, they are more visible and this causes the whites of your eyes to appear reddish or pink. At the same time, your eye produces more tears and mucus. When this leaks out it is known as a discharge; it can be yellow and stick to lashes.

Conjunctivitis is generally caused by:

- a viral infection but can also be from bacterial infection (known as infective conjunctivitis),
- an allergic reaction such as hay fever (known as allergic conjunctivitis),
- a reaction to a chemical such as chlorine or shampoo or an eyelash (known as irritant conjunctivitis) or,
- a blocked or partially blocked tear duct, particularly in babies.

Though conjunctivitis can be irritating, it rarely affects your vision.

Infective conjunctivitis can be contagious, so it is important to know how to stop it from spreading (see "What can I do to help myself now and in the future?").

What can I expect to happen?

How long does conjunctivitis symptoms last?

Symptoms usually lasts 7 – 10 days and should completely clear up within 2 weeks.

Infective conjunctivitis can be contagious for up to 14 days from the start of symptoms.

Symptoms include:

- Redness
- Pus that can stick to the lashes and is contagious
- Itchiness
- A burning sensation
- Wateriness
- A gritty feeling

Conjunctivitis can affect one eye but often affects both.

The contagious period can last for up to 14 days from the start of symptoms, but, if you feel well, there is no need to stay away from work or school.

Treatment

Bathe the eyes as explained in the "what can I do to help myself now and in the future?" section.

Use eye drops, gel or ointment from your pharmacy to lubricate and sooth the eye(s). Pain relief such as paracetamol or ibuprofen can also help to reduce discomfort.

Always store eye drops as directed on the package (not always in the fridge) and discard as instructed – usually 28 days after opening – by returning to a pharmacy for safe disposal.

Your conjunctivitis might also be allergy related and antihistamines can help, speak to a member of your pharmacy team.

Unless the conjunctivitis is caused by a bacterial infection, antibiotic eye drops will not help and should not be used; for advice speak to a member of your pharmacy team.

If you need treatment for a child under 2, check with your pharmacist, as you may need to see your GP for a prescription.



What can I do to help myself now and in the future?

The following can help ease your symptoms and stop the spread of conjunctivitis:

Do:

- Wash your hands with soap regularly, especially after touching your eyes.
- Regularly clean any sticky discharge or secretions from your eyelids with cotton wool soaked in boiled and cooled water. (Use 1 piece for each eye to avoid cross infection). If you can tolerate it, mix 1 part baby shampoo with 4 parts cooled boiled water can allow for more thorough cleaning.
- Place cool compresses (such as a flannel soaked in cold water) on the affected eye(s) to ease symptoms.
- For allergy related conjunctivitis try to determine the cause and, where possible, minimise or avoid future contact.
- In adults with blocked duct-related conjunctivitis using a face steamer can allow removal of the blockage.
- If you get conjunctivitis repeatedly, you may avoid future episodes by cleaning your eyes regularly with cooled boiled water.

Do not:

- rub your eyes.
- share towels, pillows or utensils (keep a separate towel, face cloth and soap for yourself.)
- allow anyone else to use any ointment or drops you are using.
- wear a contact lens in the affected eye(s) until all symptoms and signs of infection have gone and any treatment has been completed for 24 hours.

When to seek help

- If your baby has conjunctivitis and is less than 28 days old, make an urgent appointment with your surgery or contact NHS111 in England and Wales, the Phone First Service in Northern Ireland or NHS24 in Scotland.
- If you wear contact lenses and have conjunctivitis symptoms and spots on your eyelids, you might be allergic to the lenses, but infections can be serious, so do not wear them, and contact your optician or optometrist immediately for advice.
- If your symptoms have not cleared up after 2 weeks, get advice from your surgery.

Some symptoms could suggest a more serious eye problem. If you are not sure or if you have any of the following symptoms, ring NHS111 in England and Wales, the Phone First service in Northern Ireland or NHS24 in Scotland. They will tell you what to do and can arrange a call from a health professional if you need one:

- Pain in your eyes
- Sensitivity to light
- Changes in your vision, like wavy lines, flashing or very blurred vision
- Very red eyes (1 eye or both eyes)
- Spots or blisters on your eyelids

Where to find out more

Further information about conjunctivitis is available from the NHS website in your country or from the following trustworthy websites:

[NHS Inform, Scotland](#)

[NHS Website](#)

[NHS NI Direct](#)

[NHS Wales](#)

[Moorfields Eye Hospital](#)

[NICE CKS Conjunctivitis - Infective](#)

