

CONJUNCTIVITIS



The conjunctiva is the thin membrane, like cellophane wrap, that covers the white of the eyes and the underside of the eyelids. It is transparent but contains many blood vessels, and it is in direct contact with the tear film where bacteria, viruses, and allergens can be found.

Inflammation or infection of the conjunctiva is called conjunctivitis. The common appearance of conjunctivitis is a pink or red eye, associated with discharge that may be watery or mucous. Often the eyelids also become swollen, and the patient may feel itching, irritation, or even eye pain.

Allergic conjunctivitis often is seen in both eyes, unless the person has touched only one eye with the allergic material. The conjunctiva becomes swollen, thick, and pink in color. Watering and itching are common. The eyes may also discharge a white mucous material. Treatment can include artificial tears, cold compresses, and eyedrops that reduce swelling, itching, and redness.

Viral conjunctivitis, often known as "pink eye", can happen in either eye or both, and is often associated with the common cold. Some people can get this condition from other people who carry viruses, or from contaminated surfaces at home, work, or elsewhere. The eyes usually become very red and watery, with little mucous discharge. The eyelids can become matted together upon awakening, but are not commonly matted during the day. Antibiotic drops will not make this condition get better, but are often prescribed as part of the expectation of day care, school, or work guidelines.

The condition resolves in a few days, just like a common cold, and can look and feel better with the use of decongestant eyedrops. New antiviral medications may be of help in shortening the length of viral conjunctivitis. To avoid transmitting the infection to others, perform regular handwashing and do not share towels or other household items.

Bacterial conjunctivitis occurs when bacteria overgrow on the eyelid margins or in the tear film. This condition is often associated with a very mucous discharge that continues throughout the day. Young children and older adults are at highest risk for bacterial conjunctivitis. The eyes must be treated with antibiotic eyedrops or ointments and caution must be taken to avoid spreading the infection.

Irritative conjunctivitis occurs when outside factors cause the conjunctiva to become swollen and irritated. The most common cause is contact lenses, especially when the lenses are worn for more hours or days than recommended by the eye doctor. These conditions require special examinations and treatments that reduce the risk of serious infection, inflammation, and even scarring.

Please make time to have a complete eye and vision examination annually.