

PINK EYE (CONJUNCTIVITIS)

WHAT IS PINK EYE (CONJUNCTIVITIS)?

Pink eye can be caused by a variety of bacterial, viral, and fungal pathogens, as well as allergies (such as pollen, mold, or cosmetics), contact lens use, indoor or outdoor air pollution (such as smoke or dust), and chemical irritation (such as after swimming, or exposure to chemical fumes). Pink eye is common in children and adults, and it can be difficult to determine the exact cause.

SIGNS & SYMPTOMS:

- Excess amount of blood in the whites of the eye and eyelid, giving the eye a pink or red appearance
- Eye itchiness, irritation, swelling, watery, light sensitivity, and/or burning
- **Bacterial or viral:** One or both eyes can be affected. There is usually a discharge (thicker, whitish-yellowish in bacterial infections) from the eye. Respiratory infection symptoms or swollen lymph nodes near the front of the ear may be present. Bacterial pink eye symptoms can last a couple of days to three weeks, but generally symptoms improve in two to five days without treatment. Viral pink eye symptoms can last from one to three weeks or more.
- **Allergies:** Usually both eyes are affected. Symptoms like itchy nose, sneezing, or scratchy throat may be present, and symptoms may be seasonal. Typically symptoms clear once the allergen is removed.
- **Chemical irritation:** One or both eyes can be affected.

INCUBATION PERIOD:

Bacterial: 24-72 hours

Viral: usually 1-12 days

Allergies or chemical irritation: variable

HOW IS IT SPREAD?

Bacterial and viral: Can be easily spread by direct contact with discharge from the eye of an infected person or by direct contact with objects contaminated with eye discharge. Contaminated fingers, clothing, towels, shared eye makeup applicators, etc. may spread the infection.

Allergies or chemical irritation: Not contagious.

HOW LONG CAN A PERSON PASS THE INFECTION TO OTHERS?

Bacterial: Infected persons are contagious as long as they have symptoms or until antibiotic eye drops or ointment are started.

Viral: Some types are contagious as long as a person has symptoms (which can be variable).

PUBLIC HEALTH REPORTING REQUIREMENTS:

- Individual cases are not reportable.
- Suspected outbreaks of all types (including pink eye) are reportable to state or local public health.

CONTROL OF SPREAD:

- Children do **NOT** need to be excluded for pink eye unless the child meets other exclusion criteria, such as fever or behavioral change. Consult a health professional for diagnosis and possible treatment. Individuals can remain in school or child care once any indicated therapy is implemented unless their behavior is such that close contact with others cannot be avoided. Students with pink eye due to allergies or chemical irritation do not need to be excluded.
- Encourage frequent handwashing.
- Avoid touching or rubbing eyes and avoid sharing personal items.
- Ensure good cleaning and sanitizing practices are being followed. See page 19.

TREATMENT:

Bacterial: A health care provider may prescribe antibiotic eye drops or topical ointment. Antibiotic treatment will generally speed recovery and reduce spread to others.

Viral: There is usually no treatment.

Allergies: May be treated with allergy medications.

Chemical irritation: Symptoms generally resolves once the irritant is removed.