

Conjunctivitis (Pink Eye)



What Is It?

Conjunctivitis or pink eye is a common, mild eye infection or irritation. It can be caused by germs (infectious conjunctivitis) and often occurs with a cold or ear infection. Allergies, chemicals or irritants (e.g., smoke, dust, etc.) can also cause it.

What Are the Symptoms?

It involves one or both eyes and usually lasts three to five days. With this infection, the white parts of the eyes become pink and the eyes produce lots of tears and discharge. Eyes can be itchy and painful, sensitive to light, and in the morning the discharge may make the eyelids stick together. There is no treatment for viral conjunctivitis; it will go away by itself, but may last a week or more. Bacteria usually cause thick yellow or green pus.

Who Gets It and How?

Preschoolers and school-aged children have conjunctivitis most often. If caused by germs (infectious conjunctivitis), they can spread it to people taking care of them or to other children when some discharge or pus gets into an uninfected person's eyes. It can also be caused by mucus from the nose and throat during a respiratory infection. Children often pass the infection by rubbing their eyes, getting discharge on their hands, and touching:

- Another child's eyes
- The hands of another child who then touches his eyes
- An object which another child touches before putting her hands to her eyes

Conjunctivitis can also be spread when providers wash, dry or wipe a child's face and then use the same washcloth/towel/paper towel/tissue on another child's face. Providers could also get eye discharge on their hands when wiping a child's eyes and then pass it along as outlined above.

When Should People with this Illness Be Excluded?

Children with purulent discharge should be excluded until examined by the child's physician and cleared for re-admission to the program with or without treatment as determined by the health provider. Children with conjunctivitis observed in child care do not need to be sent home in the middle of the day. Let parents know that the symptoms were noticed. The parents should notify the facility if the health care provider decides not to prescribe a medicine. Children with conjunctivitis caused by allergies need not be excluded.

Where Should I Report It?

Notify parents and staff.

How to Limit the Spread?

- Make sure that all children and staff use good hand washing practices.
- Encourage the child not to rub his or her eyes.
- Keep children's eyes wiped free of discharge and always wash your hands after wiping a child's eyes.
- Use disposable tissues and towels.
- Teach children to wash their hands after wiping their eyes.
- Be sure that articles which may touch children's eyes (binoculars, toy cameras, etc.) are washed well with soap and water at least once daily.
- Use the same precautions practiced to stop the spread of respiratory diseases.