

Red eyes and conjunctivitis: care at home

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In short

A red eye is often conjunctivitis, sometimes called pink eye. It can be caused by a virus, bacteria, an allergy or an irritant such as dust.

Conjunctivitis caused by an infection spreads easily, so good hygiene matters while you have it. It often clears up by itself after a few days.

Call us if your eye becomes painful, light hurts your eyes, or your vision changes.

Need to be seen? See our [red eye appointments](#), or [urgent eye care](#) for a red and painful eye.

What conjunctivitis is

The conjunctiva is the thin, clear layer that covers the white of the eye. When it is inflamed, the white of the eye looks pink or red. One or both eyes may also be itchy, watery, gritty or sore, and discharge can make the eyelids stick together when you wake up.

- **Viral conjunctivitis** is more common in adults. The discharge is usually clear, and the eyes may burn or itch. It spreads very easily.
- **Bacterial conjunctivitis** is more common in children. It often causes a yellow or green sticky discharge. It also spreads very easily.
- **Allergic conjunctivitis** usually affects both eyes, with itching and a clear discharge, often alongside hay fever. It does not spread from person to person.
- **Irritants**, such as dust, smoke or chemicals, can also make the eyes red.

Your optometrist can tell you the likely cause and the right treatment. Our optometrists are therapeutically endorsed, so they can prescribe medicines for eye infections and allergies when you need them.

Caring for your eyes at home

1 Wash your hands

before and after touching your eyes or putting in drops.

2 Clean your eyes gently

several times a day with a clean cotton wool pad soaked in warm tap water. Wipe from the corner nearest your nose outwards.

3 Use a new pad for each eye

, so you do not carry the infection from one eye to the other.

4 Cool your eyes

with a clean, cold face washer held over your closed eyes for a few minutes, if that helps.

5 Use any drops exactly as directed.

If you were given antibiotic drops or ointment, keep using them for as long as you were told, even once your eye looks better.

6 Leave your contact lenses out.

If you wear disposable lenses, throw away the pair you were wearing. Wear glasses until at least a week after your symptoms have gone. If you wear another type of lens, ask us what to do with them.

7 Throw away eye makeup

you used just before or during the infection.

Stopping it spreading

Viral and bacterial conjunctivitis pass easily to other people, through touch, coughs and sneezes, and things like towels and tissues.

Do

- ✓ Wash your hands often, and always after touching your eyes
- ✓ Cover your mouth when you cough or sneeze
- ✓ Wash towels, face washers, pillowcases and bed linen regularly, and dry them in the sun if you can
- ✓ Use your own towel and face washer

Don't

- ✗ Share towels, face washers, pillows or makeup
- ✗ Rub or touch your eyes
- ✗ Wear contact lenses until your eyes are better

School, childcare and work

Children with infective conjunctivitis should stay home from school or childcare until the discharge from their eyes has stopped, unless their doctor advises otherwise. People stay infectious while there is a discharge from the eye.

Allergies and other causes of red eyes

Allergic conjunctivitis is treated with antihistamine eye drops or tablets, and some hay fever nasal sprays also help. Antibiotic drops do not help viral, allergic or irritant conjunctivitis.

Red eyes that keep coming back can have another cause, such as **dry eye** or inflamed eyelids (blepharitis). If your optometrist finds blepharitis, a warm compress and lid massage may be part of your care. See **warm compress and lid massage**.

If you wear contact lenses and your eye is red, take the lenses out and call us the same day. See **contact lens care and cleaning** for the warning signs.

How long it lasts

Conjunctivitis often clears up by itself after a few days. Infective conjunctivitis can last from two days to three weeks. If your eye is not settling, book a review so your optometrist can check the cause.

When to call us on (03) 9702 9118

Call the same day if you have:

- Eye pain
- Light that hurts your eyes
- Blurred vision, or any change in your vision
- A large amount of discharge or pus
- A red eye while wearing contact lenses
- A red eye that is not settling after a few days

A baby under one month old with red, sticky eyes needs to see a doctor urgently.

Call (03) 9702 9118

⚠ Go now to the Royal Victorian Eye and Ear Hospital emergency department (32 Gisborne Street, East Melbourne, open 24 hours), or call 000, if:

- You have severe eye pain or a sudden loss of vision
- A chemical has splashed in your eye. Rinse it under cool running water for 15 to 20 minutes first
- Something has gone into or cut the eye

If your eyes are red or sore, book online or call us on (03) 9702 9118.

FAQs

— Is conjunctivitis contagious?

Viral and bacterial conjunctivitis spread very easily, and you stay infectious while there is a discharge from your eye. Allergic conjunctivitis does not spread from person to person.

— How long does conjunctivitis last?

It often clears up by itself after a few days. Infective conjunctivitis can last from two days to three weeks. Call us if it is not settling.

— Do I need antibiotic eye drops?

Only some red eyes need them. Antibiotic drops can help bacterial conjunctivitis, but they do not help viral, allergic or irritant conjunctivitis. Your optometrist will advise.

— Can I wear contact lenses with conjunctivitis?

No. Leave them out until your eyes are better. If you wear disposable lenses, throw away the pair you were wearing and wear glasses until at least a week after your symptoms have gone.

— Should my child stay home from school?

Yes, if the conjunctivitis is infective. Keep them home until the discharge from their eyes has stopped, unless their doctor advises otherwise.
