

Conjunctivitis

Many different sources of eye irritation can cause conjunctivitis. The most common are viruses, allergies and environmental irritants, and bacterial infections. The conjunctiva responds to all of these stimuli by turning red.

Viruses are the most common cause of conjunctivitis. Some viruses produce the familiar red eye, sore throat, and runny nose of a common cold. Others may affect only one eye. Viral conjunctivitis usually produces a watery discharge, with minimal lid swelling and a gritty feeling.

Allergies and environmental irritants tend to cause a type of conjunctivitis that produces a clear discharge. Some kinds of allergies, like hay fever, make the eyes very itchy, while others merely produce a chronic redness. Environmental irritants, such as smoke or fumes, can also cause conjunctivitis.

Bacterial infections, such as staphylococcus or streptococcus, cause a red eye, which produces considerable amounts of pus. If the amount of discharge from the eye is great, an acute infection is likely and prompt consultation with your primary care provider is advisable. Some bacterial infections are more chronic and may produce little or no discharge except for some mild crusting on the eyelashes in the morning. You may notice a moderate amount of lid swelling, but no itching.

Note: Infectious conjunctivitis, whether viral or bacterial, can be quite contagious, so contact with the affected persons' tears must be avoided. Good hand washing helps to prevent the spread. Do not share washcloths or towels. Avoid touching your face.

SYMPTOMS & TREATMENTS

If caused by viruses (with no itching present):

- Clear discharge
- Minimal eyelid swelling
- Gritty sensation

Treatment: Use warm compresses 4 times a day for 10 minutes for each eye. Compresses can be made using a clean washcloth soaked in cool or warm tap water.

If caused by allergies or environmental irritants:

- Clear discharge
- Moderate to severe eyelid swelling
- Mild to intense itching

Treatment: Treat with cool compresses four times a day for ten minutes for each eye.

If caused by bacteria (with no itching present):

- Pus-like discharge
- Moderate eyelid swelling
- Minimal itching

Treatment: Use warm compresses 4 times a day for 10 minutes for each eye. Compresses can be made using a clean washcloth soaked in cool or warm tap water.

CAUTIONS

- *Seek medical care* if no improvement in 24-48 hours, or if you have impaired vision, severe sensitivity to light, eye pain, or fever. To schedule an appointment with your UHS primary care provider, call 275-2662.
- *If you wear contact lenses*, they must be removed until all symptoms have resolved. Before reusing your contacts, check with your eye care provider about cleaning or replacing the contacts to prevent re-infecting the eye.
- *If you are a health care worker or a student who sees patients*, check the Strong Memorial Hospital Infection Control Manual online or call the UHS Occupational Health Nurse at 275-1164 for advice.
- *If you wear eye makeup*, buy new makeup after your infection clears. Throw away your old eye makeup.

SCHEDULING AN APPOINTMENT

Call 275-2662 to schedule an appointment at the University Health Service (UHS). UHS offers a full range of services. All visits to UHS are confidential.

LINKS

For more information about conjunctivitis, visit:

American Academy of Family Physicians
<http://www.aafp.org/afp/980215ap/morrow.html>

MedlinePlus
<http://www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/ency/article/001010.htm>