



Patient education: Conjunctivitis (pink eye) (The Basics)

[Written by the doctors and editors at UpToDate](#)

What is pink eye?

Pink eye is the everyday term people use to describe an infection or irritation of the eye. The medical term for pink eye is "conjunctivitis."

If you have pink eye, your eye (or eyes) might:

- Turn pink or red
- Weep or ooze a gooey liquid
- Become itchy or burn
- Get stuck shut, especially when you first wake up

Pink eye can be caused by an infection, allergies, or an unknown irritation.

Can you catch pink eye from someone else?

Yes. When pink eye is caused by an infection, it can spread easily. Usually, people catch it from touching something that has been in contact with an infected person's eye. It can also be spread when an infected person touches someone else, and then that person touches his or her eyes.

If you know someone with pink eye, avoid touching his or her pillowcases, towels, or other personal items.

When should I see my doctor or nurse?

See your doctor or nurse if your eye hurts, or if you still have trouble seeing clearly after blinking. If you do not have these problems, but think you might have pink eye, your doctor or nurse might be able to give you advice over the phone.

Can pink eye be treated?

Most cases of pink eye go away on their own without treatment. But some types of pink eye can be treated.

When pink eye is caused by infection, it is usually caused by a virus, so antibiotics will **not** help. Still, pink eye caused by a virus can last several days. Pink eye caused by an infection with bacteria can be treated with antibiotic eye drops or gels. Pink eye caused by other problems can be treated with eye drops normally used to treat allergies. These drops will not cure the pink eye, but they can help with itchiness and irritation.

When using eye drops for infection, do not touch your good eye after touching your affected eye, and do not touch the bottle or dropper directly in one eye and then use it in the other. Doing these things can cause the infection to spread from one eye to the other.

What if I wear contact lenses?

If you wear contact lenses and you have symptoms of pink eye, it is really important to have a doctor look at your eyes. In people who wear contacts, the symptoms of pink eye can be caused by "corneal abrasion." Corneal abrasion is a scratch on the eye and can be a serious problem.

During treatment for eye infections, you might need to stop wearing your contacts for a short time. If your contacts are disposable, you will want to throw them away and start fresh. If your contacts are not disposable, you will need to carefully clean them. You should also throw away your contact lens case and get a new one.

Can pink eye be prevented?

To keep from getting or spreading pink eye, wash your hands often with soap and water. The table has instructions on how to wash your hands to prevent spreading illness ([table 1](#)). Also, avoid sharing towels, bedding, or other personal items with a person who has pink eye.

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GRAPHICS

Hand washing to prevent spreading illness

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| ▪ Wet your hands and put soap on them |
| ▪ Rub your hands together for at least 20 seconds. Make sure to clean your wrists, fingernails, and in between your fingers. |
| ▪ Rinse your hands |
| ▪ Dry your hands with a paper towel that you can throw away |

If you are not near a sink, you can use a hand gel to clean your hands. The gels with at least 60 percent alcohol work the best. But it is better to wash with soap and water if you can.

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