

Pinkeye (conjunctivitis)

What is pinkeye?

Pinkeye, also known as conjunctivitis, is a common condition in children, though it can affect people of any age. Pinkeye is an inflammation of the conjunctiva (the thin, transparent layer that lines the white part of the eye) and the inside of the eyelid.

Most often, pinkeye is caused by a virus or bacteria and can spread easily from person to person. It can also result from allergies, air pollutants, or exposure to other physical or chemical irritants.

The information in this HealthLinkBC File is about pinkeye caused by an infection.

What are the symptoms?

Pinkeye usually makes the whites of the eyes turn pink or red. Common symptoms include watery, itchy and irritated eyes, along with swollen eyelids. In some cases a thick pus-like discharge may develop, making the eyelids sticky, especially when you sleep. A cloth dipped in warm water and applied gently to the affected area will help clean away any crusty discharge.

Is pinkeye serious?

Pinkeye is usually a mild infection and not a major health concern. It usually clears up by itself in 7 days to several weeks.

Sometimes pinkeye can be a more serious infection. If symptoms worsen, it's important to see a health care provider. Your health care provider will know if anything is wrong and may prescribe antibiotic eye drops or ointment if needed.

If your child has pinkeye, your health care provider will let you know if your child should stay home or if they can attend school or

daycare. If your child has been prescribed antibiotics, they should stay home for at least 24 hours after starting treatment. It's important to complete the full course of antibiotics and that they are taken as directed to help clear the infection and prevent it from spreading.

How is it spread?

Pinkeye caused by a bacterial or viral infection spreads very easily. A person with pinkeye can easily spread it to several family members within a few days. It often spreads when an infected person touches the discharge from their eye and then touches another person. It can also spread when someone touches the discharge from an infected eye and then touches their own eye.

You can also be infected by sharing items such as tissues, facecloths, towels or eye droppers that have been contaminated with discharge from the eye of an infected person. The bacteria or virus causing pinkeye can also spread through contact with droplets from an infected person's cough or sneeze.

What can I do to limit the spread of pinkeye?

It's important for your child and everyone else in your family to follow strict hygiene practices. These practices should be followed for up to 10 days after pinkeye has been diagnosed or as long as the eye remains red.

Here are some helpful tips to follow:

- Wash your hands frequently with soap and water throughout the day. For more information on proper hand washing, please visit [HealthLinkBC File #85 Hand washing: Help stop the spread of germs](#)

- Don't rub or touch the infected eye. If only one eye is infected, take extra care not to touch the other eye. Always wash your hands immediately after touching the infected eye
- Wash out any discharge from the infected eye twice daily. Use a damp tissue to gently wipe from the inner corner outward in a single stroke. Use a fresh tissue to blot dry. Be careful not to touch the uninfected eye
- Use paper towels instead of washcloths and towels for washing and drying the hands and face. If this isn't possible, make sure the infected person's towels and cloths are not used by others
- Wash the infected person's towels, washcloths and linens separately from the rest of the household laundry. Use detergent, the hot water setting and dry thoroughly in a dryer

Anyone with pinkeye should avoid wearing contact lenses and eye makeup until all symptoms of infection have cleared. Discard any eye makeup used when the symptoms first started. Once the infection has cleared, thoroughly clean the contact lenses and their storage case. Be sure to follow the lens cleaning and care instructions provided by your eye care professional before wearing the lenses again.

How is it treated?

Pinkeye often clears up on its own. If the infection is caused by bacteria, your health care provider may prescribe antibiotic eye drops or ointment to help clear the infection.

Remember to wash your hands thoroughly with soap and water before and after applying drops or ointment. This prevents the spreading of the infection.

Applying eye drops

Follow these tips when applying eye drops:

- Before using eye drops, make sure that the dropper is clean
- Avoid letting the dropper touch the eye, eyelids or any surface when applying the eye drops
- Always return the dropper directly to the bottle after use
- Gently pull down on the lower eyelid to create a small pocket and look up, or have the person look up. This will help catch the drop and prevent any being wasted
- Another way is to apply the drops right onto the white part of the eye. This part of the eye is less sensitive than the coloured portion or the pupil
- To steady the hand while holding the dropper, rest it gently on the person's forehead
- Only one drop is needed at a time
- After applying the drop, keep the eye closed for 1 to 2 minutes without blinking to allow the medication to absorb properly
- Store the eye drops in the refrigerator. The cool sensation will let the person know the drop has reached the eye

Applying ointment

Ointment can be harder to apply directly to the eyeball, especially with young children. A helpful alternative is to place a small amount of ointment on the eyelashes. The warmth of the body will gradually melt the ointment, allowing it to reach the eye. This approach is helpful when children are being fussy or resist having ointment applied directly to the eye.



BC Centre for Disease Control
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