



THE FAMILY PHARMACIST

A QUICK READ FOR YOUR OTC NEED!

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PINK EYE IN CHILDREN AND ADULTS

Taking care of our eyes is something that should be important to all of us. Keeping our eyes clean and free from disease is necessary to contribute to an overall feeling of wellness and healthfulness. Delicate organs and precious gifts, our eyes are constantly exposed to a dirty world full of microorganisms, allergens, toxins, and other foreign materials. Occasionally, these contaminants overwhelm our natural defenses and may cause temporary injury to our eyes.

“Pink eye” is not a medical term, but rather describes the appearance of the eye when the small blood vessels in the conjunctiva of the eye become swollen and visibly red or *pink* due to one of the contaminants mentioned above. The medical term is *conjunctivitis*. The *conjunctiva* is a thin membrane that protects the eye by covering the inside of the eyelid and the white part of the eyeball. A bloodshot conjunctiva can be alarming and, understandably,

move us to seek treatment. Since the causes of pink eye can be both infectious and noninfectious, it’s important to be careful in the choice of a medication and not to jump too quickly to using an antibiotic.

In addition to the eyes being inflamed, symptoms may vary due to the offending substance. Viruses are the most common cause of pink eye in adults, and bacteria are the most common cause in kids. The common cold or a sinus infection can also lead to a case of pink eye. Rubbing your nose and eyes to relieve itching and discomfort can spread bacteria or viruses to the eyes. So, if you get sick, make an effort to limit the spread of infection. And if you suspect pink eye, wash your hands frequently and keep them away from your face. Don’t share towels or face cloths. Even makeup can spread infection so you may have to discard contaminated items.

Allergies and chemicals in the environment can also cause pink eye. Treatment for these culprits can be pretty simple, such as removing exposure to the allergen or irritant and

using an over-the-counter (OTC) eye drop (see below) along with cool compresses for swelling or itchiness.

The chart below can be used to determine what is causing your symptoms, but be careful when self-diagnosing. See your doctor, preferably an ophthalmologist, if you are experiencing vision changes, light sensitivity, pain in your eye(s), or a rash or blisters around the eye or on the eyelid. These signs and symptoms may indicate herpes or shingles infection.

Treatment for pink eye. Treatment for pink eye includes some very simple hygienic measures. If you wear contact lenses, remove them as soon as possible. Keep the eyes clean with lubricating eye drops, cool compresses for swelling or itching, or warm compresses to soften crusts. If these don’t help, see your doctor for an accurate diagnosis, prescription medicines if necessary, and to make sure you don’t have something more serious going on.

| Causes of pink eye | Symptoms | Treatment |
|--|---|--|
| Viral | <ul style="list-style-type: none">Burning, gritty feeling in the eyeThin, clear, watery dischargeMay occur with an upper respiratory tract infectionStarts in one eye, often spreads to the other eye | <ul style="list-style-type: none">Antibiotics are NOT effective for viral infectionsMost cases resolve within one to two weeksSimple OTC eye lubricants can be used to soothe, like Genteal® Tears Liquid Eye Drops, or Refresh® Tears Lubricant Eye Drops |
| Bacterial | <ul style="list-style-type: none">Burning feeling in the eyeWhite, yellow, or green pus dischargeEyelids are crusty or sticky in morningMay occur with ear infections in kidsStarts in one eye, can spread to the other eye | <ul style="list-style-type: none">Most symptoms resolve within a week WITHOUT antibioticsDoctors usually save antibiotics for those who don’t improve in about five days or if school/daycare/work requires them to returnIf needed, prescription antibiotic eye drops or ointments are available for adults and childrenTreatment is usually for 5 to 7 days |
| An allergen or irritant substance | <ul style="list-style-type: none">Itchy eyesThin, clear, watery dischargeAffects both eyes | <ul style="list-style-type: none">Remove exposure to allergen or irritantOver-the-counter (OTC) antihistamine eye drops are available and very effective for allergies, e.g., Pataday® Once Daily Relief, or Zaditor® Eye Itch reliefUse Simple OTC lubricating eye drops for irritants. Genteal® Tears Liquid Eye Drops, etc. |

Table modified from Pharmacist’s Letter, July 2024, Therapeutic Research Center, Stockton, CA