

Conjunctivitis

English

Conjunctivitis is a common eye infection, especially among children under five. It is an inflammation (swelling and redness) of the conjunctiva, which is the clear membrane that covers the white part of the eye and the inside of the eyelids. Sometimes conjunctivitis is called 'pink eye', because the eye looks pink or red.

Treatment is dependent on the type of conjunctivitis affecting your child. Conjunctivitis can be an infectious or allergic condition. Infectious conjunctivitis is highly contagious.

Signs and symptoms of conjunctivitis

If your child has conjunctivitis, they may have:

- a red or pink eye (or both eyes)
- redness behind the eyelid
- swelling of the eyelids, making them appear puffy
- excessive tears
- a yellow-green discharge from the eye which dries when your child sleeps, causing crusting around the eyelids
- a dislike of bright lights (photophobia)
- a gritty feeling (like there is sand in the eye)
- itchiness of the eyes and eye rubbing.

Symptoms usually develop within 24 to 72 hours of becoming infected, and can last from two days to three weeks.

What causes conjunctivitis?

Infectious conjunctivitis

Conjunctivitis can be caused by an infection (either a virus or bacteria), which is highly contagious. Your child could develop infectious conjunctivitis if they come into contact with:

- the discharge from the eyes, nose or throat of an infected person through touch, coughing or sneezing
- contaminated fingers or objects
- contaminated water or contaminated towels when swimming.

A person with infectious conjunctivitis will remain infectious as long as there is a discharge from their eye.

If your child has infectious conjunctivitis, do not allow them to share eye drops, tissues, make-up, towels or pillowcases with other people. Children with infectious conjunctivitis should be kept home from child care, kindergarten or school until the discharge from the eyes has cleared. Be sure to regularly wash hands thoroughly to prevent the infection spreading to others.

Allergic conjunctivitis

Conjunctivitis can also be caused by an allergic reaction. Allergic conjunctivitis is not contagious. It is more likely in children with a history of other allergies. Your child will often show other signs of hay fever if their conjunctivitis is the result of an allergy. Signs can include an itchy or runny nose and sneezing, and the eyes are itchy and watery. Children with allergic conjunctivitis almost always rub their eyes a lot.

Care at home

If the symptoms are mild, gentle cleaning of the eyes with cotton balls soaked in warm water may help your child feel better.

- Clean in one direction only, outwards from the inside (nose side) of the eye. This prevents the other eye becoming infected if only one eye is affected.
- Discard the cotton ball each time to prevent recontamination.

Do not try to clean inside the eyelids as this may cause damage to the conjunctiva. Lubricating eye drops such as 'artificial tears' may give some relief.

Sore, inflamed and itchy eyes due to allergic conjunctivitis may be helped by antihistamines. Speak to your doctor or pharmacist about antihistamine use for your child.

You may have heard breastmilk can be used on a baby's eyes if they are gunky or sticky. Breastmilk does not treat conjunctivitis and there is no benefit to using it on your baby's eyes, but it is not harmful. Formula should never be used.

When to see a doctor

See a doctor if your child's conjunctivitis isn't getting better after two days, or if your child has any of the following:

- severe pain
- problems with their vision/eyesight
- increased swelling, redness and tenderness in the eyelids and around the eyes
- is generally unwell and has a fever
- a persistent white spot in the cornea (the clear 'window' at the front of the eye).

The doctor will determine what type of conjunctivitis your child has, and may recommend treatment with antibiotic drops for bacterial conjunctivitis. Treatment should be applied to both eyes, even if only one eye appears to be infected. Continue using the drops for two days after the discharge stops.

Key points to remember

- Conjunctivitis can be an infectious or allergic condition. If infectious, it is often highly contagious.
- A child with infectious conjunctivitis is contagious until discharge from the eyes has disappeared.
- Children with infectious conjunctivitis should be kept home from child care, kindergarten or school.

For more information

- See your doctor, Maternal and Child Health Nurse or pharmacist.
- Kids Health Info: [Fever in children](http://rch.org.au/kidsinfo/fact_sheets/Fever_in_children) (rch.org.au/kidsinfo/fact_sheets/Fever_in_children)



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rch.org.au/kidsinfo

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