

# Conjunctivitis

# FACTSHEET

DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH  
Division of Epidemiology, Disease Surveillance and Investigation  
899 N. Capitol Street, NE, Suite 580  
Washington, D.C. 20002  
(202) 442-9371 Fax (202) 442-8060  
[www.doh.dc.gov](http://www.doh.dc.gov)

## What is Conjunctivitis?

Conjunctivitis, more commonly known as “Pinkeye”, is an infection of the conjunctiva (the outermost layer of the eye). The three most common types of conjunctivitis are bacterial, viral, and allergic. Bacterial conjunctivitis can be caused by a variety of bacteria. Viral conjunctivitis is often associated with an upper respiratory tract infection, cold, or sore throat. Allergic conjunctivitis occurs more frequently among those with allergic conditions. When related to allergies, the symptoms are often seasonal. Allergic conjunctivitis may also be caused by intolerances to substances such as cosmetics, perfume, dust, or drugs.

## Who gets Conjunctivitis?

Anyone can get conjunctivitis. Children under the age of five are most frequently affected. Bacterial and viral conjunctivitis appears less frequently with age.

## What are the symptoms of Conjunctivitis?

The symptoms of conjunctivitis are slightly different depending on the cause of the conjunctivitis. Symptoms of bacterial conjunctivitis include the following:

- Stringy discharge that may cause the eyelids to stick together, especially after sleeping.
- Swelling of the conjunctiva
- Redness
- Tearing
- Irritation or a gritty feeling in the eye
- Usually only one eye is affected, but the infection may spread to the other eye

Symptoms of viral conjunctivitis include the following:

- Watery discharge from the affected eye
- Irritation
- Redness
- Infection usually involves one eye, but may spread to the other eye

Symptoms of allergic conjunctivitis include the following:

- Itching
- Tearing
- Swollen eyelids

Usually both eyes are affected

## How is Conjunctivitis spread?

Bacterial and viral conjunctivitis can be spread by contact with the drainage or discharge from the eye or upper respiratory tracts of infected people. They can also be

spread by using contaminated articles such as make-up applicators, wash clothes, towels, clothing, multiple dose eye medications, and unwashed hands.

## How soon do symptoms appear?

Symptoms usually appear 24 to 72 hours after exposure.

## Is a person with Conjunctivitis contagious?

A person with viral or bacterial conjunctivitis is contagious and can spread the illness to other people. A person with allergic conjunctivitis is not contagious.

## How is Conjunctivitis treated?

Treatment for conjunctivitis is dependent on the cause. For allergic conjunctivitis removing the source of the allergy is extremely important. Additionally, cool compresses and artificial tears may relieve the discomfort. For severe cases physician prescribed medications may be necessary. Treatment of bacterial conjunctivitis consists of use of an antibiotic eye drop or ointment that a health-care provider prescribes. There is no specific treatment for viral conjunctivitis. Antibiotics are not effective. However, symptoms may be relieved with the use of cool compresses and artificial tears.

## Should a person with Conjunctivitis be excluded from work or school?

A child with bacterial or viral conjunctivitis should not attend school until the symptoms resolve.

## How can Conjunctivitis be prevented?

Conjunctivitis can be prevented by:

- Cleaning and disinfecting bathroom surfaces
- Use of eye protection when swimming
- Avoid touching the face
- Washing hands frequently and thoroughly
- Do not share towels or wash clothes
- Do not reuse handkerchiefs, disposable tissues are preferred.

## Want more information?

Information about Conjunctivitis and other related health topics can be found at the website [www.cdc.gov](http://www.cdc.gov). The DC Department of Health promotes the health and safety of the District residents. For additional information, please call (202) 442-9371.

