

Patient information: Conjunctivitis (pinkeye) (The Basics)

Written by the doctors and editors at UpToDate

What is pinkeye? — “Pinkeye” is the everyday term people use to describe an infection or irritation of the eye. The medical term for pinkeye is “conjunctivitis.”

If you have pinkeye, your eye (or eyes) may:

- Turn red or pink
- Weep or ooze a gooey liquid
- Become itchy or burn
- Get stuck shut

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

Can you catch pinkeye from someone else? — Yes. When pinkeye is caused by an infection, it can spread easily. Usually, people catch it from touching something that has touched an infected person’s eye.

If you know someone with pinkeye, 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 is red, oozing, or in pain.

Can pinkeye be treated? — Most cases of pinkeye go away on their own, without treatment. But, yes, it can be treated.

Pinkeye caused by an infection with bacteria can be treated with antibiotic eye drops or gels. Pinkeye caused by other problems can be treated with eye drops normally used to treat allergies. These drops will not cure the pinkeye, but they can help with itchiness and irritation. People with dry eyes can use medicine-free eye drops to wet the eyes.

When using eye drops for infection, do not let drops trickle from one eye to the other. Also, do not touch your good eye after touching your affected eye. Both of 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 pinkeye, it is really important to have a doctor look at your eyes. In people who wear contacts, the symptoms of pinkeye can be caused by serious problems.

During treatment for eye infections, you may need to stop wearing your contacts for a short time. Plus, you may need to throw away your contact lens case and carefully clean your contacts. If your contacts are disposable, you will want to throw them away and start fresh.

Can pinkeye be prevented? — To keep from getting or spreading pinkeye, wash your hands often with soap and water. If washing is not possible, alcohol-based hand gels work, too. Also, avoid sharing towels, bed clothes, or other personal items with a person who has pinkeye.