

Pinkeye (conjunctivitis)

What is pinkeye?

Pinkeye, or conjunctivitis, is a common childhood illness. Pinkeye is an inflammation of the covering of the eyeball and the inside of the eyelid. It is usually caused by a virus or bacteria, and can spread easily to other people.

Pinkeye may also be caused by an allergy, air pollution or other physical or chemical irritants; however the information provided in this HealthLinkBC File is about pinkeye from an infection.

What are the symptoms?

Pinkeye usually makes the whites of the eyes turn pink or red. It can cause teary, red, itchy eyes, and the eyelids may be swollen. Pus or thick discharge can make the eyelids sticky, especially when you sleep. A cloth dipped in warm water and applied gently to the affected area will help remove any crusty discharge.

Is pinkeye serious?

Pinkeye is usually a mild infection that is not a serious threat to health. It will often clear up by itself in 7 to 10 days.

Sometimes pinkeye can be a more serious infection. Visit your health care provider if symptoms of pinkeye get worse. Your health care provider will know if anything is wrong and may prescribe antibiotic eye drops or ointment.

When your child has pinkeye, your health care provider can tell you if your child can return to school or daycare, or should stay home. If your child has been prescribed antibiotics they should stay home for at least 24 hours

after starting their treatment. It is important that your child takes all (completes the full course) of the antibiotics and that they are taken on time.

How is it spread?

Pinkeye caused by a bacterial or viral infection spreads very easily. A person with pinkeye can easily infect several family members within a few days. It is often passed on when an infected person touches the pus or discharge from their eye and then touches someone else. It is also spread by touching the discharge from an infected eye and then touching your own eye.

You can also be infected through contact with objects such as a tissue, facecloth, towel or eye dropper that have been contaminated with discharge from the eye of an infected person. The bacteria or virus causing pinkeye may also be spread to others through contact with droplets from an infected person's cough or sneeze.

What can I do to limit the spread of pinkeye?

It is 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 is red.

Here are some good rules to follow:

- Wash your hands with soap and warm water several times daily. For more information on hand washing, see [HealthLinkBC File #85 Hand washing: Help stop the spread of germs](#)

- Don't rub or touch the infected eye. If only 1 eye is infected, be extra careful not to touch the other eye. Wash your hands right away after touching an infected person's eyes or face
- Any discharge from an infected eye should be washed out twice a day. Using a damp facial tissue wipe outward with a single stroke, starting at the side near the nose. Blot dry with a new tissue. 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 you can't do this, make sure others do not use the infected person's towels and face cloths
- Towels, face cloths and bed linens used by the infected person should be washed separately from the family's other laundry. Use detergent, the hottest water setting, and dry in a hot dryer

A person with pinkeye should not wear contact lenses or eye make-up until their eye is free of redness, irritation and any discharge. Throw away all eye make-up that was used when the symptoms first started. Once the infection has gone, make sure the contact lenses and lens case have been carefully cleaned as recommended by your eye care professional before using them again.

How is it treated?

Pinkeye will often clear up by itself. However, your health care provider might prescribe antibiotic drops or ointment for pinkeye caused by bacteria.

Remember to always wash your hands before and after applying drops or ointment.

Applying eye drops

Follow these tips when applying eye drops:

- Before applying eye drops make sure that the dropper is clean
- Make sure to avoid touching the dropper to the eye, eyelids or any other surface when applying the eye drops
- Always return the dropper directly to the bottle
- Gently pull down on the lower eyelid to form a pocket and look up, or have your child look up. This will help catch the drops and prevent any being wasted
- Another way is to apply the drops right onto the white of the eye. This part of the eye is less sensitive than the pupil and the coloured portion
- If you need to steady the hand holding the eye drops, rest it on the forehead
- You should only need 1 drop at a time
- Keep your eye drops in the fridge, so the coolness will let the person know right away if the drop is reaching the eyeball
- After the drop has been put in, keep the eyelid closed for 1 to 2 minutes without blinking. This helps the medicine work

Applying ointment

Ointment is harder to put directly onto the eyeball. Instead, put the ointment on the eyelashes. It will eventually melt and reach the eye. This works best if you are trying to put ointment into the eyes of children when they are being fussy.



BC Centre for Disease Control
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