

Allergic Conjunctivitis

What is allergic conjunctivitis, and what causes it?

A clear, thin lining covers your eyeball and the inside of your eyelids. If something irritates this lining, your eyes may become red and swollen. Your eyes also may itch, hurt, or water. This is called conjunctivitis. It is also known as pink eye.

When an allergen causes these symptoms, the condition is called allergic conjunctivitis. You cannot spread it to other people. Some allergens that cause this condition include: pollen from trees, grass, and ragweed; animal skin and fluid such as saliva; perfumes; cosmetics; skin medicines; air pollution; and smoke.

Will it damage my eyesight?

It is irritating and uncomfortable, but rarely affects your vision.

What can I do to avoid getting it?

Try to figure out what causes your symptoms. For example, if you are allergic to pollen or mold, stay indoors when those levels are high. You can usually find out when allergen levels are high from the weather report. Keep your doors and windows closed. Use an air conditioner during the summer.

How is it treated?

Steroid nasal sprays and antihistamine pills may help. Eye drops can also help relieve itchy, watery eyes and may keep symptoms from returning. Your doctor will talk with you about which treatment is right for you.

Do these treatments have side effects?

Many eye drops can cause burning and stinging when you first put them in, but this usually goes away in a few minutes. It is important to remember that all medicines might cause side effects, so talk with your doctor before using any medicine, including eye drops.

What else can I do to feel better?

It may help to put a cold washcloth over your eyes. Lubricating eye drops (sometimes called artificial tears) may also make your eyes feel better. You can buy these drops over the counter.

Can I wear my contact lenses?

It's not a good idea to wear them while your symptoms are bad because the contacts may cause the conjunctivitis to get worse. Instead, wear your glasses until your eyes feel better.

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This handout is provided to you by your family doctor and the American Academy of Family Physicians. Other health-related information is available from the AAFP online at <http://familydoctor.org>.

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