

Eye Care and Conjunctivitis

If your eyes look red and feel gritty and uncomfortable, or itchy, or if there is a sticky fluid on your eyelids, you may have conjunctivitis. Conjunctivitis is an inflammation of the conjunctiva, which is the thin lining that protects the white part of the eyes and inside the eyelids. It can clear up on its own after a week or so, but medicines can help fix it more quickly.



What causes conjunctivitis?

- Infection by either bacteria or viruses is a common cause.
- Allergy is also a common cause that may be triggered by pollen (hay-fever), dust mites, animal fur and eye make-up.
- Irritant or chemical conjunctivitis sometimes occurs for example after getting shampoo in your eyes, or from the chlorine in swimming pools.

Symptoms of conjunctivitis generally include:

- The whites of the eyes look red and swollen or inflamed.
- The eyes will often have a white or yellow sticky fluid or 'discharge' with a bacterial infection. This can cause the eyelids to stick together or form crusts while you sleep.
- The eyes are usually more watery and itchy with conjunctivitis caused by an allergy or a virus infection.
- Your vision is not normally affected, except the discharge may cause some blurring which clears with blinking.
- Your eyes may feel gritty, irritated and sore, but it is not usually very painful.
- One eye may be affected, but it often spreads to both eyes.

You should see your optometrist or doctor right away if:

- There is any pain inside the eye or light hurts your eyes.
- There is any sudden change in your vision.
- You have conjunctivitis symptoms and wear contact lenses, as contact lens wearers have a greater risk of more serious eye problems.
- It is a baby who has symptoms of conjunctivitis.
- Your symptoms do not improve, or get worse after a few days.

Contact lens wearers

People who wear contact lenses have a greater risk of serious eye infections and eye ulcers, so should ask their optometrist or doctor for advice promptly. Do not treat an eye infection yourself - go to your optometrist or doctor. If you wear disposable contact lenses, you should throw away the set you are using along with the lens case. Do not wear contact lenses again until all symptoms have gone and for 24 hours after the last dose of any eye drops or ointment. If you keep the lenses, you might get the same infection again. If your lenses are not disposable, make sure you clean and disinfect them thoroughly.

What treatments are available?

Chloramphenicol, an antibiotic eye drop or ointment, is available from your pharmacist. It can help you recover from a bacterial infection more quickly.

Put 1 or 2 drops in each eye every two hours while awake for the first two days, then 1 drop every four hours for a further three days.

Alternatively, apply a short 1.5cm strip of ointment along the inside of each bottom eyelid every three hours. You may use the drops during the day and the ointment at night while asleep.

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Lubricant eye drops may reduce eye discomfort and stickiness of conjunctivitis. For people with allergic conjunctivitis, antihistamines and eye drops called “mast-cell stabilisers” may help improve symptoms. Ask your pharmacist about these.

Self Care

A clean cloth soaked in warm water can be used to wash away secretions from the eyes and lashes. Applying a cool damp cloth to closed eyes can also be soothing.

Conjunctivitis caused by bacteria or viruses can easily spread to others, so don't share face-cloths, towels or pillows.

Wash your hands regularly, particularly after touching your eyes, as this can help prevent spreading the infection to others.

If you have conjunctivitis from an allergy, see if you can find out what might be the cause and try to stay away from it.

How to use eye drops and eye ointment

- Read the instructions on the label carefully.
- Wash your hands and rinse thoroughly.
- Remove contact lenses if being used.
- Lie down or sit with your head tilted back.
- Gently pull down the lower eyelid to make a pouch and look up.
- Drop the right amount of liquid into the pouch, or run ointment along the inside.
- Sometimes you may taste the drops in your mouth. Closing the eye and pressing gently on the corner next to the nose, will help keep the drops in the eye where they are needed.
- With a clean tissue gently remove any excess from around the outside of the eye.
- Wash your hands thoroughly again.
- Eye drops and ointment can blur your vision for a short time after using them. Do not drive or operate machinery until you can see clearly again.
- Don't use eye make-up until the redness has gone.
- As with all medicines, do not give eye drops or ointment to other people, even if you think they have the same problem.
- Once opened, chloramphenicol eye drops can be kept at room temperature, but should be discarded 28 days after first opening the container.
- Do not keep eye drops and ointments left over after treatment.
- If you have any questions, please talk to your pharmacist.

Pharmacy Self Care

Other patient information leaflets similar to this one are available from selected pharmacies around New Zealand. The leaflets are part of the Pharmacy Self Care programme and the 32 fact cards in the programme provide information on health concerns that can be managed with advice and assistance from your pharmacist. Ask about Pharmacy Self Care.