Pink Eye: Usually Mild and Easy to Treat

Pink, itchy eyes? Pink eye –or conjunctivitis– is common and spreads easily. It sometimes needs medical treatment, depending on the cause. Know the symptoms, when to seek treatment, and how to help prevent it.

Pink eye, also known as conjunctivitis, is one of the most common and treatable eye conditions in children and adults. It is an inflammation of the conjunctiva, the thin, clear tissue that lines the inside of the eyelid and the white part of the eyeball. This inflammation makes blood vessels more visible and gives the eye a pink or reddish color.

What Are the Symptoms of Pink Eye?

The signs and symptoms of pink eye may vary depending on the cause, but they usually include:

- Redness or swelling of the white of the eye or inside the eyelids
- Increased amount of tears
- White, yellow or green eye discharge
- Itchy eyes
- Burning eyes
- Increased sensitivity to light
- Gritty feeling in the eye
- Crusting of the eyelids or lashes

What Causes Pink Eye?

There are four main causes of pink eye:

- Viruses
- Bacteria
- Allergens (like pet dander or dust mites)
- Irritants (like smog or swimming pool chlorine) that infect or irritate the eye and eyelid lining

How Is Pink Eye Treated?

The treatment for pink eye depends on the cause. Pink eye is usually mild and will often get better on its own, even without treatment. However, there are times when it is important to see a healthcare professional and get an antibiotic or other medical treatment.

How Do I Stop Pink Eye from Spreading?

Pink eye caused by a virus or bacteria is very contagious and spreads easily and quickly from person to person. Pink eye that is caused by allergens or irritants is not contagious, but it is possible to develop a secondary infection caused by a virus or bacteria that is contagious. By following some simple self-care steps, like washing your hands and not touching your eyes, you can reduce the risk of getting or spreading pink eye.

When Should I Call a Health Care Provider?

Most cases of pink eye are mild and get better without treatment. However, severe cases need to be looked at by a healthcare professional and may require specific treatment and close follow-up. If you have pink eye, you should see your healthcare professional if you have:

- Moderate to severe pain in your eye(s)
- Blurred vision or increased sensitivity to light
- Intense redness in the eye(s)
- A weakened immune system, for example from HIV or cancer treatment
- Bacterial pink eye that does not improve after 24 hours of antibiotic use
- Symptoms that get worse or don't improve
- Pre-existing eye conditions that may put you at risk for complications or severe infection

Pink Eye in Newborns

Pink eye in newborns can be very serious because it may cause long-term eye problems or lead to infection of organs other than the eye. A newborn baby who has symptoms of pink eye should see a healthcare professional.

Pink eye in newborns can be caused by an infection, irritation, or a blocked tear duct. Neonatal pink eye caused by sexually transmitted infections, like gonorrhea or chlamydia, can be very serious. If you are pregnant and think you may have a sexually transmitted infection, visit your healthcare professional for testing and treatment. If you don't know whether you have a sexually transmitted infection but have recently given birth and your newborn shows signs of pink eye, visit your child's healthcare professional right away.

Most hospitals are required by state law to put drops or ointment in a newborn's eyes to prevent pink eye.