

Pinkeye

Pinkeye is when the membrane covering the eye and lining the eyelid becomes inflamed. This membrane is called the conjunctiva ("con-JUNK-ti-vah"), so pinkeye is also called conjunctivitis ("con-JUNK-ti-VITE-us").

Usually this membrane is clear, but when inflamed it can turn red or pink, and it can swell up. It can be uncomfortable, just like a scratchy throat is. It can make goopy mucus, just like a runny nose does.

Inflammation is how the immune system does its most basic work. Different things can trigger it, including a virus, bacteria, an allergy, or a foreign body (like a piece of dust in the eye). Some are contagious, and some are not. Some need a doctor, and some don't. Here is how to figure out what to do.

Causes of pinkeye

Allergy:

- Pink, watery, itchy or gritty eyes, on both sides.
- The person may also be sneezing or wheezing.
- Itchy eyes is the number one issue.
- Not contagious. Taking an antibiotic will NOT help. Rinsing the eyes and taking antihistamines CAN help. Can usually be treated at home (see below).

Virus:

- A pink eye, often stuck shut in the morning, with a runny or mucous discharge, rather than pus-looking, and a "bumpy" looking inner eyelid. (Sometimes both eyes are stuck shut, but one is usually worse than the other.)
- Discomfort is the number one issue: feels gritty and irritated.
- The person may have seemed to be getting a cold in the previous week, and they may have a runny nose, scratchy throat, etc. They may have been around others at home or school who had a cold.
- The redness can often move from one eye to the other.
- Contagious. Taking an antibiotic will NOT help. Can usually be treated at home for 48 hours (see below).

Bacteria:

- A pink eye, often stuck shut in the morning, with a lot of thick goopy discharge that looks like pus. (Sometimes both eyes are stuck shut, but one is usually worse than the other.)
- Goop which looks like pus is the number one issue. The goop reappears in a few minutes after you wipe it away. It keeps appearing all day.

- They may have been around others who have goopy pinkeye, but they do not usually feel like they have cold symptoms.
- Contagious. Using an antibiotic CAN help. Can usually be treated at home for 48 hours (see below).

Foreign body:

- Sudden and painful, with redness that doesn't usually involve the entire eye and inner eyelid, with a lot of watering, usually one-sided.
- The main issue is pain.
- Sometimes the object is already gone, but the redness, watering, and irritation continue for a couple of days.
- Not contagious. May need medical attention, depending on circumstances (see below).

Warning Signs

- If the person can't see properly, it is likely to be a serious problem and the person should go to the doctor or urgent-care center immediately. One example in an adult is acute glaucoma (high pressure inside the eyeball), which can permanently affect vision.
- If the person can't move the eye normally (looking left/ right/ up/ down without moving the head), it is likely to be a serious problem and the person should go to the doctor or urgent-care center immediately. One example is "peri-orbital cellulitis," an infection of the tissues behind the eye.
- If the person uses contact lenses (especially extended-wear), they should remove them and keep them out. If the eye doesn't recover in 12-24 hours, they should go to an eye doctor. Tell the doctor's office when you call exactly what happened.
- If light causes dramatically worse, sudden, severe pain, they should go to an eye doctor immediately. There may be inflammation of the iris requiring special treatment.
- If the person had any injury to the face before the redness appeared, they should see a doctor if not improved in 24-48 hours. A scratch on the eye often just has to heal by itself. However, if there's a foreign body in there, it should be removed to prevent infection. Note: a scratch feels just like a foreign body.
- If the person has other illness (example: fever, painful peeing, or vomiting), they should see a doctor, as the eye problem may be part of a bigger issue that could be treated.

Treatment

Contagious pinkeye:

It is usually safe to treat this at home for a couple of days. It is generally safe (in terms of contagion) to return to school when the discharge is gone. The redness itself is not contagious!

Gently wipe the eyes with sterile saline (salt) solution, which you can make at home (see below).

Keep the whole family's hands clean. If the affected person is a child, you may need to clean their toys with anti-germ wipes or dilute bleach water.

Treat the condition as if it were a cold: increase fluids, rest, avoid spreading it, and be patient.

If the person gets worse, or gets no better after 48 hours of home treatment, see a doctor to determine if there is a more serious problem going on. Please do not hassle your doctor to prescribe antibiotics for a viral infection. Antibiotics only work on bacteria.

Some schools ask that the person use antibiotic ointment/drops before returning to school. You'll need to negotiate this with your school.

Allergic pinkeye:

Try to determine the triggers. They are usually airborne and never likely to be food-related.

- Examples: If it is pollen or smoke in the air outdoors, try to stay inside with air conditioning. If it is pet hair, cigarettes, or other indoor triggers, eliminate them until the inflammation is resolved.
- You can have a combination of a foreign body and an allergic reaction; for example, if a gnat or a speck of pollen gets in the eye.

As long as it isn't causing persistent severe pain or difficulty seeing, treat it as an allergy for 48 hours. If worse or no better, see your personal doctor.

You can take over-the-counter antihistamines according to directions on the box. Consult with your doctor before taking more than is recommended on the box.

The eyes and nose can be rinsed with sterile saline (salt) solution. You can make this at home (see below), and use a squirt bottle or a clean cup for the eyes and a squirt bottle or neti-type pot for the nose. If the throat is itchy, **you can also gargle with salt water** to reduce the inflammation.

Injury, or unusual forms of pinkeye: Please see Warning Signs, above.

How to make sterile saline

Have a clean dry jar and lid available (example: a jelly jar that was washed in the dishwasher). Add a scant 1/4 tsp salt and one cup boiled water. Put on lid and allow to dissolve and cool before using. Make fresh every day.

Eyedrops, the easy way

Wash your hands. Have the person lie down comfortably flat. Let them gently close their eyes. Tell them you are going to make a little lake (of eyedrops) in the corner of their eye. Gently place the recommended drops on the inner corner of the eye, next to the bridge of the nose. No need to touch the eyelid, or open the eye. The drops will seep under the lids. Now ask the person to open their eyes and gently blink at the ceiling/sky. The medicine will flow gently across the surface of the eyes. If it stings, the person might squeeze their eyes shut, but don't worry! Most gets in.

Antibiotic eye ointment, the easy way

Wash your hands. Have the person sit facing you (or have a baby lie in your lap). Take the cap off the tube. Ask the person to turn their eyes up to the ceiling/sky, and gently open the lower eyelid. Squeeze a ribbon of ointment along the inside of the lower eyelid. Let go. Ask the person to notice that their vision will be blurry for a couple minutes. Ointment is usually soothing, and does not sting.

Mother's milk

Fresh human milk is good for the eyes! It contains live antibodies and enzymes that kill germs, including lysozyme, which is also found in tears. The milk can be dripped directly into the eyes from the breast 4-6 times per day (see "Eyedrops," above). It does not sting. Safe for all ages, despite giggles.

Cool compress

A clean (CLEAN) cloth, folded smooth, soaked in plain cold tap water and gently held on the closed eye as often as desired, can relieve some of the irritation and discomfort.

Warm compress

A clean (CLEAN) cloth, folded smooth, soaked in very warm fluid, and gently held on the closed eye as often as desired, can increase circulation to the area to speed healing. Fluid can be: tap water, boiled and cooled; eyebright herbal tea (Euphrasia); Oregon-grape root herbal tea (Mahonia).

Potato poultice

Traditionally, potato has been peeled, rinsed, grated, and wrapped in clean (CLEAN) fabric, then held against the closed eye, as often as desired. I am unable to speculate on any mechanism of action! No idea! Proceed with caution.