

# Conjunctivitis - symptoms, treatment and prevention

Conjunctivitis is an inflammation of the lining of the eye and eyelid caused by bacteria, viruses, chemicals or allergies (colour plate no. 3).

## Symptoms

- redness in the whites of the eyes
- irritation in one or both eyes
- discharge, causing the eyelids to stick together in the morning
- swelling of the eyelids
- sensitivity to light.

Diagnosis is made by clinical and/or microscopic examination and culture of discharge from the eye. It is usually not possible to tell whether the conjunctivitis is caused by bacteria or viruses without laboratory tests.

Viral and bacterial conjunctivitis can be spread by direct contact with eye secretions or indirectly by contact with towels, washcloths, handkerchiefs and other objects that have been contaminated with eye secretions. In some cases it can be spread by insects such as flies.

Conjunctivitis caused by chemicals or allergies is not infectious.

## Incubation period

*(time between becoming infected and developing symptoms)*

Usually 24 – 72 hours.

## Infectious period

*(time during which an infected person can infect others)*

While the eye discharge is present.

## Treatment

Antibiotic eye drops or ointment may be prescribed by a doctor. Since bacterial and viral infections look the same, a person with symptoms of conjunctivitis should always be seen by a doctor for examination, diagnosis and treatment.

## Control of spread

- Exclude from child care, preschool, school or work until discharge from the eyes has ceased.
- Good personal hygiene (careful hand washing, using soap and warm water) must be followed.
- Do not share towels and wash cloths.

## Links

- [Hand hygiene](#)

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