

Health Tips for Parents

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Does my child have pinkeye?

When a child's eye becomes itchy and red, parents can become alarmed and assume their child has bacterial conjunctivitis, but many conditions can cause eye redness and irritation and only some of them are contagious.



“Pinkeye is kind of a wastebasket term — a lot of things get thrown into it,” says Piper Calasanti, MD, UCLA pediatrician in Santa Monica. “When we talk about pinkeye, we usually mean bacterial conjunctivitis, but many things can cause the eye to become red or inflamed, including viruses, allergies, contact lenses or air pollutants.”



Conjunctivitis is any inflammation of the clear membranes covering the white of the eye and the inner side of the eyelid. The same viruses that are responsible for colds and infections of the ear, sinuses and throat can also cause conjunctivitis. Children with viral conjunctivitis do not benefit from taking antibiotics. The condition is contagious, however, and they may need to stay home from school until the fever or other symptoms resolve.

Children who suffer from allergies or have a family history of hay fever, asthma or eczema are prone to allergic conjunctivitis, which causes itchy eyes but is treatable, and not contagious. This type of inflammation is usually accompanied by nasal symptoms including a runny nose or stuffiness and a recent exposure to allergens such as cats, dogs, dust or pollen.

Children with any type of conjunctivitis — whether caused by bacteria, viruses or allergies — typically awaken with crust in one or both eyes. Some children also complain of a sandy or gritty feeling in the eye. You can gently remove the crust by using warm compresses.

If the reddened eye also develops a green or yellow discharge (pus), bacterial conjunctivitis or pinkeye is usually the cause. Children with allergic conjunctivitis typically have a watery discharge from the eye, but no pus or discharge.

When to take your child to the doctor

Pinkeye is fairly common and unlikely to cause long-term vision or eye problems if promptly treated. See a doctor immediately if your child develops any of the following symptoms:

- eye redness accompanied by green or yellow pus
- vision suddenly becomes blurry
- eyes become sensitive to light
- significant eye pain or swelling
- inability to open eyes due to pain or photosensitivity



Preventing pinkeye

Bacterial conjunctivitis easily spreads from eye to eye and person to person. The best way to prevent the spread of infection is through frequent hand washing. Children with bacterial conjunctivitis should see a doctor immediately and should not return to school until 24 hours after beginning a course of antibiotic eye drops or ointment.

This information is provided courtesy of the pediatricians at Mattel Children's Hospital UCLA. UCLA Health pediatricians are conveniently located in your neighborhood: Westwood, Brentwood, Manhattan Beach, Santa Monica and West Los Angeles. All health and health-related information contained in this publication is intended to be general in nature and should not be used as a substitute for a visit with a healthcare professional. **Subscribe to Health Tips for Parents at uclahealth.org/enews.**