

Pink Eye / Conjunctivitis

Christopher Bassett, MD
Cowles Clinic Pediatrics (706) 454-1210

Pink eye, or conjunctivitis, is a very contagious infection of the covering of the eye featuring redness, eye itching or pain, and eye discharge. This handout will let you know what it is, how to prevent it, and what can be done about it.

What are the symptoms?

When your child has pink eye, it's pretty obvious. The child will have a white to yellow discharge from usually one, and sometimes both eyes. The eyelids may be stuck together due to the discharge, especially after naps. The cheek may even have some dry crusty discharge on it. The white part of the eye is usually pink or red, and there may be a little puffiness to the eyelid due to the infection.

How do you get pink eye?

Pink eye is very common and extremely contagious. When a child has pink eye, the eye discharge is teeming with bacteria. These bacteria can then get on the hands of the child, who can then spread it to other children by direct contact (touching) or indirect contact (sharing of personal items or toys). A child can also contract pink eye by rubbing the eyes with dirty fingers, or as a complication of having a cold.

Even with the strictest cleaning regimens, this disease can spread quickly through a daycare. This is why it is very important to make sure your child stays home from daycare and visits our office if he or she has any symptoms of pink eye.

How is pink eye treated?

If untreated, pink eye will go away, though it will take longer to go away - meaning more sick days and more spread to other children. There is also a higher chance that the infection could spread to infect the eye socket if left untreated, which is a very serious (though uncommon) complication. Moreover, a child with pink eye has a 10-25% chance of also having an ear infection, so it's best to get the child looked at right away. I prefer using antibiotic eye drops (rather than messy eye ointments), which are easy to apply and work in about 24 hours. I usually recommend using the drops for 4 or 5 days. Make sure to wash your hands before and after applying the drops.

How can pink eye be prevented?

Prevention is very important with pink eye, since it's so incredibly contagious. First, everyone in the family must observe strict handwashing to keep the bacteria from spreading from your hands. Even adults can get pink eye if they don't keep their hands clean. Second, you need to keep a clean environment by sanitizing toys, and not sharing any personal items. Third, and most importantly, all children who have pink eye should stay home and away from other children until they've been on antibiotic eye drops for at least 24 hours.

When should I call the office?

As mentioned, pink eye is a pretty obvious infection. If you suspect your child has pink eye, bring them in right away. Once your child is on eye drops, you should call us back if the child develops a fever or begins to act very sick; if the eyelids become very red or very swollen; if the child's vision becomes blurry; if the child develops an earache; or if the infection doesn't clear up after 2-3 days of eye drops. Of course, you can call us 24 hours if you have questions or concerns.