

Pink Eye: What To Do

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Pink, itchy eyes have your child complaining and you worrying? Well, you're not alone. I'm Dr. Adam Cohen. As a dad and a pediatrician, I know that conjunctivitis, or pink eye, as it's commonly known, can raise questions and concerns.

In this podcast, we'll review pink eye causes and treatment, suggestions on when to call or visit a doctor, and practical tips to prevent pink eye from spreading. But before we get practical, let's get technical.

Part of the eye and the inside of the eyelid have a thin, clear covering that both protects and moistens the eye. This covering is called the conjunctiva. Remember, the medical term for pink eye is conjunctivitis.

The four main agents that cause inflammation of the conjunctiva are bacteria, viruses, allergens, and irritants. Most parents I know are pretty good detectives, so when it comes to two of the causes, irritants and allergens, knowing where your child was or what she was playing with can usually give you some good clues.

If she was swimming in the neighborhood pool, chlorine could be the problem. Have a new pet or has the pollen been unusually bad? Then allergies may be the culprit. Remove the irritant or allergen, and the pink eye usually clears up.

That leaves the viral and bacterial causes. Pink eye from either of these is usually mild and generally clears up on its own. But it's pretty contagious, so it spreads easily from child-to-child or child-to-parent.

Symptoms might include a white, yellow, or green discharge, or oozing, from the eye. Your child may tell you it feels like something gritty is in his eye, or complain of itching and burning. You may notice more tears as well. But when is it time to contact your doctor?

If your child complains of eye pain, blurred vision, or sensitivity to light; if your child is a newborn or has a medical condition; if symptoms persist or become worse; or if you're concerned about your child, it's time to seek medical advice.

Antibiotics will be prescribed if the doctor suspects that your child has bacterial pink eye and it's not getting better on its own. But remember, antibiotics won't help viral pink eye. For minor and routine cases of viral conjunctivitis, the symptoms usually clear up within 7 to 14 days. To keep your child more comfortable, use artificial tears or cold compresses to relieve dryness or inflammation.

And always play it safe — if your child has pink eye, ask your doctor if and how long she might have to stay away from school, day care, or other activities.

Here are some prevention tips that help pink eye from spreading to others, including family members:

- Remind your family to wash their hands often with soap and water.
- If your child is very young, help him or her with handwashing.
- Make sure children don't use hand towels to wipe their eyes.
- Wash towels, pillow cases, and wash cloths in hot water and detergent.
- Assign your child his own towel and wash cloth.
- Keep paper towels and tissue boxes in easy-to-reach places.
- And always wash your hands thoroughly before or after cleaning an infected eye.

For more information about pink eye and its treatment, please visit www.cdc.gov and type *pink eye* in the search box.

For the most accurate health information, visit www.cdc.gov or call 1-800-CDC-INFO, 24/7.