



## A Red Eye is a Red Eye is a Red Eye

"A red eye is a red eye is a red eye." This was a phrase that I was taught in school to reiterate the fact that when the eye experiences insult or infection, there are only so many ways it can react. One of the eye's main reactions is to turn red.

On the so-called "whites" of the eyes, there are actually a number of layers. Inflammation to any one of these layers can make the eye appear red. The conjunctiva is the outermost layer that covers a portion of the front of the eye and lines the insides of the eyelids. It is a thin, clear mucous membrane that has a lot of blood vessels. When this layer gets inflamed, it is commonly referred to as "pink eye." Many people traditionally think of "pink eye" as an eye infection often found in children; however, this is not always the case.

Conjunctivitis is an inflammation of the conjunctiva. This condition comes in many forms and affects people of all ages. There are two broad categories of conjunctivitis: those caused by infection and those that are allergic in nature. Some common symptoms of conjunctivitis include red or watery eyes, blurred vision, sandy/gritty feeling and a discharge, or goop, around the eyes.

Conjunctivitis caused by infection can be broken down further into viral and bacterial forms. In bacterial conjunctivitis, your doctor may prescribe antibiotics to help your body fight off the infection. In most viral infections, antibiotics will not work but may still be prescribed to protect your eye from getting a secondary bacterial infection. Whenever you are taking antibiotics, follow the directions exactly as prescribed and for the full time period recommended by your doctor. Underutilization of antibiotics causes resistance, which is when the bacteria are not stopped by the medicine. Also, keeping the eyes mucous free with sterile saline can be helpful. The use and especially improper use of contact lenses puts a person at higher risk for an eye infection.

Infectious conjunctivitis is highly contagious! To avoid the spread of infection, keep your hands away from your eyes. Also, wash your hands regularly and promptly if you do accidentally touch your eyes. Wash and do not share washcloths, towels, bed linens, cosmetics or eye drops. Small children who have this condition may need to be kept out of school or daycare until the condition is gone. Also, it is a good idea to throw away any contaminated make-up or contact lenses. Remember not to touch the tip of any eye drop bottles to your eye either.

Allergic conjunctivitis commonly occurs from your body's reaction to things like pollen, cosmetics or certain fabrics. Irritants like pollution or chlorine in swimming pools may produce conjunctivitis as well. The ideal treatment for this type of conjunctivitis is to remove the irritation. For example, if cat dander causes a reaction, avoiding contact with cats will be effective. There are eye drops and other treatment strategies that can be used to relieve discomfort as well.

So you may be asking the question, "how can I tell what kind of conjunctivitis I have?" The answer is you probably can't. In addition, certain forms of conjunctivitis and/or inflammation to deeper layers of the eyes can be indicative of a more serious condition that may harm the eyes or of a problem in the body. In addition, conjunctivitis may be accompanied by other severe eye problems that can be sight threatening. For all of these reasons, you should see your eye doctor promptly and let him or her decide your diagnosis as well as the proper treatment for your condition. After all, there is a reason your red eye is a red eye is a red eye!

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