

Treating Allergic Conjunctivitis

What is allergic conjunctivitis and what causes it?

Allergic conjunctivitis is an allergy in your eyes. *Conjunctivitis* is swelling and redness of the clear membrane (covering) of the eyelid and eye. If you have allergic conjunctivitis, your eyes may become red and swollen. They may itch or even hurt, and may “water,” or make tears. You may have a runny nose and you may sneeze a lot.

These symptoms are started by an *allergen*, which is a foreign substance that irritates your body. Your body reacts to the allergen by releasing chemicals, such as histamine, which cause many of your allergic symptoms. Some common allergens and irritants include pollen from trees, grass and ragweed, animal skin and hair, skin medicines, air pollution and smoke.

Will allergic conjunctivitis damage my eyesight?

Allergic conjunctivitis is irritating and uncomfortable, but it will not damage your eyesight. It’s not a good idea to wear contacts while you have allergic conjunctivitis, because you might get worse or get an eye infection. Instead, wear your glasses until you get relief from your symptoms.

What can I do to avoid getting these symptoms?

Try your best to avoid the allergens that start your symptoms. Stay indoors when pollen levels are high. You can sometimes find out when pollen and other allergen levels are high from weather news on your local TV or radio stations, or in the newspaper. Keep your doors and windows closed during the summer months and use an air conditioner.

Can I do anything to help the symptoms?

You can treat mild symptoms yourself with medicines you buy over-the-counter at the grocery store or drug store (no prescriptions are needed). Lubricating eye drops (sometimes called artificial tears) can wash out your eyes and make the swelling go down. Antihistamines in tablet form (such as Benadryl, Chlor-Trimeton and Tavist) can reduce the itching, redness, swelling and discomfort. You can also put a cold compress over your eyes for relief (use a washcloth or small towel soaked in cold water or wrapped around ice cubes).

What other treatments are available?

If cold compresses and over-the-counter medicines don't help, your doctor may prescribe medicine for you. Your doctor might suggest eye drops that contain an antihistamine-decongestant combination. This medicine relieves your symptoms and stops them from coming back. The drops are available both in over-the-counter forms (look for one of these: Clear Eyes ACR, Naphcon-A, Visine A.C.) and in prescription forms (Vasocon-A). These medicines should only be used for less than two weeks.

A new medicine, ketorolac tromethamine (Acular), can be used even while you are taking other eye medicines, such as those used for glaucoma. However, ketorolac may not be a good choice for you if you are allergic to aspirin or ibuprofen, or if you have a bleeding disorder. Levocabastine (Livostin) is another new medicine. It helps itchy, watery eyes and may keep symptoms from returning.

If these medicines don't give you enough relief, your doctor may suggest *desensitization therapy*: your allergic reaction is reduced or stopped when you take small doses of the allergen. The small doses are slowly increased. This is one way to control long-term (chronic) allergic conjunctivitis. Another medicine that can be used is steroid eye drops but, because these can have serious side effects, they are used only in people with severe allergic conjunctivitis.

Do these medicines have side effects?

All of the eye drops listed above can cause burning and stinging at first when you put them in, but this goes away in a few minutes. Each medicine has side effects that don't happen often, so talk with your doctor before you decide which medicine to use. Remember, don't wear contact lenses while using any of the eye drops.

This handout provides a general overview on this topic and may not apply to everyone. To find out if this handout applies to you and to get more information on this subject, talk to your family doctor.



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