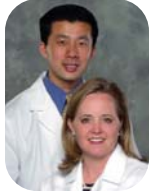


By Dr. Ivan Tsai and Dr. Shilah Tsai



Why do my eyes get red? Do I have pink eye?

Pink eye is a common term often used to describe inflammation of the conjunctiva (the thin membrane covering the eye and eyelids). Another term for pink eye is conjunctivitis. The three most common causes of conjunctivitis are seasonal allergies, viral or bacterial infections. All three of these conditions often cause the eyes to become red, itchy, and uncomfortable. However, there are distinct differences between them.

Allergic reactions are the primary cause of non-contagious conjunctivitis. The most frequent triggers include airborne allergens such as pollen, pet hair or dander and dust. The common symptoms of allergic conjunctivitis are redness, itching, and burning sensation with a clear watery discharge. These symptoms usually occur in both eyes. If you think you have ocular allergies, the most effective treatment is prevention. Stay indoors when the pollen count is high or when the Santa Ana winds are blowing. If ocular allergies cannot be controlled by prevention, there are several effective medications that may help relieve the symptoms as well as physically wash away allergens present within the eye. Your eye doctor would know best which drops or ointment to prescribe for your particular type of ocular allergy.

Viral infections of the eye are usually caused by germs similar to those that cause the common cold. Viral infections are often associated with red, painful, and light sensitive eyes with a clear watery discharge. Sometimes, your vision becomes blurry and distorted. These symptoms usually occur in one eye first, and can travel to the other eye if you are not careful. These types of infection are often contagious and should be treated as such.

An ounce of prevention

The easiest form of prevention is hand washing to decrease the likelihood of spreading any infection to your eyes or to others. Remind children to wash their hands frequently while at school and also when they arrive home. Children in the same classroom usually infect each other and then bring the infection home to siblings and parents. Infected individuals should not share eye drops, tissues, eye makeup washcloths, towels or pillowcases with others. Although some viral infections resolve on their own, certain viral infections may cause permanent vision changes. When you suspect that you may have a viral infection, medical attention should be sought sooner than later.

A bacterial infection of the eye is the most serious cause of conjunctivitis, because it can lead to a corneal ulcer, scarring and permanent vision loss, if left untreated. As a result, eye infections caused by bacteria require immediate medical attention. The symptoms associated with bacterial conjunctivitis are similar to viral conjunctivitis, except the discharge will be somewhat thicker and colored white, yellow, or green. Sometimes the discharge will



cause the eyelids to stick together upon waking in the morning. Bacterial infections can be caused simply by rubbing your eyes with dirty hands or by over-wearing your contact lenses.

The mistake that many contact lens wearers make is only changing their contact lenses when they "feel like its time" to change them. When contact lenses are prescribed, your eye doctor should instruct you on the proper wearing schedule. If the wearing schedule is abused, a bacterial infection may occur at anytime. In addition to changing your contact lenses as instructed by your eye doctor, bacterial infections can be avoided by never sleeping in your contact lenses as well as changing your contact lens solution and case regularly. In addition, remember to wash your hands prior to any contact with the eye.

Some less common reasons for red eyes include dry eye, foreign objects in the eye (metal or organic material), inflammation caused by an autoimmune disease, or glaucoma. Because there are so many possibilities causing a red eye, it is important to have your eyes checked instead of waiting to see if "it will just go away."

Red eyes can be minor, but have the possibility to develop into a more serious condition. See your eye doctor for a diagnosis before using any eye drops in your medicine cabinet from previous infections or other eye conditions. Don't overlook the importance of an annual eye exam as well. Even though a person may not need glasses or an updated prescription, an annual eye exam is important because your eye doctor will review the health of the eyes to diagnose and treat any underlying conditions. **HB**

For more information on this topic, please contact Dr. Ivan Tsai or Dr. Shilah Tsai of Huntington Beach Optometry by phone at (714) 840-2020 or via e-mail: drivantsai@hboptometry.com or drshilahtsai@hboptometry.com