

Pink eye with a side of mucus ^[1]

Alice,

I've had a really nasty cold for about twelve days now. Yesterday I started waking up with a lot of sticky mucus type stuff under my eyelashes, and now my eyes are red and watering all the time. Should I be concerned? Is there something besides warm water (which seems to help for a few minutes) that I can do?

Answer

Dear Reader,

Pretty in pink? Not so much when it's pink in the eyes with a side (or two) of mucus. Perhaps it's time to see a health care provider to give you a proper diagnosis with potential treatment. Without making an actual diagnosis, what you describe seems a lot like conjunctivitis, often known as "pink eye."

Conjunctivitis is a common infection or inflammation of the conjunctiva, or the transparent membrane that covers the white of the eye as well as the inside of the eyelids. Conjunctivitis can be caused by bacteria, a viral infection, or allergies. Common complaints include discomfort, redness, discharge, tears, and a gritty sensation, as if a grain of sand were in the eye (one or both eyes). Conjunctivitis is highly contagious and may be passed by hand-to-eye contact, as well as from one eye to the other, and even by way of other items like towels. Pink eye may stay contagious for two weeks after symptoms begin occurring. Don't worry though; conjunctivitis cannot be transmitted by staring longingly into someone's eyes.

Seeing a health care provider for a diagnosis may be the best solution. Be sure to inform them of your potential risk factors, which include exposure to someone with conjunctivitis, exposure to an allergen, or wearing contact lenses, especially when they're worn for an extended period of time. A health care provider will examine your eyes and likely prescribe anti-bacterial eye drops or ointment for bacterial conjunctivitis. Conjunctivitis usually clears up in a few days to a week. Viral conjunctivitis usually clears up by itself without treatment, although viral conjunctivitis caused by the herpes simplex virus can be treated with antiviral medication.

As you indicated, warm water soaks have been soothing for you, but only briefly. Actually, warm

water soaks may increase itching and redness. Try cool water compresses instead; you may find these more relieving. Make sure to keep the compress(es) from touching your other eye to reduce cross infection. Eye drops may also help relieve some of the symptoms. If you wear contact lenses, consider taking a break from wearing them. Also, you may use cotton balls or tissues to wipe your eyes, wiping away from the direction of your nose to the outside of your face, and use a fresh cotton ball or tissue for each eye.

To prevent transmission of pink eye to other people or your other eye (if not already infected) make sure to dispose of the used compresses and cotton balls and wash your hands thoroughly. To increase your chances of preventing conjunctivitis, try practicing these good hygiene tips (which can also help to prevent many other infections!):

- Not touching your eyes with your hands — Try using paper tissues and dispose of them after each use.
- Washing your hands regularly and correctly — Check out [Handwashing do's and don'ts](#) [2].
- Using a clean towel or wash cloth each day.
- Avoid sharing towels or wash cloths.
- Changing your pillowcase frequently.
- Tossing your eye cosmetics, like mascara, if you've had pink eye.
- Avoid sharing eye cosmetics and eye-care items such as eye drops.
- If you're concealing your pink eyes with sunglasses or other eye gear, keep them clean and disinfected.

List adapted from the [Mayo Clinic](#) [3].

Keep your eyes clear and dazzling with proper treatment and good hygiene — sloppy seconds of cross-/re-infection of pink eye just isn't pretty!

Alice!

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