

Allergic Conjunctivitis

What is allergic conjunctivitis and what causes it?

A clear, thin membrane called the conjunctiva covers your eyeball and the inside of your eyelids. If something irritates this covering, your eyes may become red and swollen. Your eyes also may itch or even hurt, and they may water. This is called conjunctivitis.

When an allergen is the cause of the irritation, the condition is called allergic conjunctivitis. Some common allergens include pollen from trees, grass and ragweed; animal skin and hair; perfumes and cosmetics; skin medicines; air pollution and smoke.

Will allergic conjunctivitis damage my eyesight?

No. Allergic conjunctivitis is irritating and uncomfortable, but it will not hurt your eyesight.

What can I do to avoid getting these symptoms?

Try to identify and avoid the allergens that cause your symptoms. Stay indoors when pollen and mold levels are high. You can usually find out when these levels are high from the weather report. Keep your doors and windows closed during the summer months and use an air conditioner.

How is allergic conjunctivitis treated?

Several types of eye drops are available to treat allergic conjunctivitis. They can help relieve itchy, watery eyes and may keep symptoms from returning. Eye drops may contain an antihistamine, a decongestant, a nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory agent, or a mast-cell stabilizer. Some drops contain a combination of these. Some eye drops require a prescription. Antihistamine pills (which many people take for their allergies) may also help. Your doctor will talk with you about which treatment is right for you.

Do these eye drops have side effects?

Many eye drops can cause burning and stinging at first when you put them in, but this usually goes away in a few minutes. All medicines may potentially cause side effects, so talk with your doctor before using medicine, including eye drops.

What else can I do to feel better?

You can put a cold washcloth over your eyes for relief. Lubricating eye drops (sometimes called artificial tears) may make your eyes feel better. You can buy these drops without a prescription.

Can I wear my contact lenses?

It's not a good idea to wear contacts while you have allergic conjunctivitis, because you might get an eye infection. Instead, wear your glasses until your eyes feel better.

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