

Allergic Conjunctivitis

What is allergic conjunctivitis?

Allergic conjunctivitis is a common eye condition that affects more than 20% of the population. It is an allergic reaction of the outer lining of the eyeball (conjunctiva) to particles in the environment to which a person is allergic (allergens). Dust, pollen, animal dander, and sometimes, even medications are all possible allergens. When the eyes are exposed to these allergens, the eyes become red, watery, itchy or swollen. Although these symptoms can look like the signs of an infection, allergic conjunctivitis is not infectious or contagious.

What causes allergic conjunctivitis?

As noted above, allergic conjunctivitis is caused by contact with particles to which a person may be sensitized (allergens). Spring, summer and fall allergies tend to be caused by tree, weed, grass, and flower pollen. Some people can have allergies all year round due to other household allergens, including dust, mold and animal dander.

What are some common symptoms of allergic conjunctivitis?

Symptoms of allergic conjunctivitis may vary from very mild to very severe. Itching is the most common symptom. Other symptoms may include stinging, tearing, and burning. The conjunctiva is usually pink and/or bloodshot [See Figure 1]. The white area immediately around the colored part of the eyes can also swell, causing tiny bumps visible on the surface of the eye. Normally thin eyelid skin can also be affected, becoming thick, swollen, itchy, or red. Children may frequently rub or roll their eyes. They may even tightly squeeze or excessively blink to relieve the itchiness.



Fig. 1: A pink or bloodshot conjunctiva with itching can be a sign of allergic conjunctivitis.



Is allergy testing necessary to find out what is causing the allergic reaction?

A diagnosis of allergic conjunctivitis is made by history and clinical examination. Allergy testing is usually not necessary since the types of allergens involved are usually very common, like grass, weed, and tree pollens. Eye drop treatments are the same no matter what allergen is causing the allergic reaction. Although the most common allergens are often hard to avoid, we can suggest a few ways to minimize your child's exposure (see below).

How do you treat allergic conjunctivitis?

Allergen avoidance is the best way to treat allergic conjunctivitis. In the case of pollen allergies, symptoms are made worse by outdoor activities. Wearing glasses or goggles outdoors can minimize exposure to outdoor allergens. Washing the hair and face can effectively remove these allergens from the surface of the eyes, hair, and skin. Using refrigerated artificial tears can rinse the eye and also remove allergens from the eye. These can provide additional relief when used cold instead of at room temperature. It is also important to avoid rubbing the eyes, as this can make symptoms of allergic conjunctivitis worse.

What medication(s) are available to treat allergic conjunctivitis?

Both prescription and over-the-counter allergy eye drops can effectively treat allergic conjunctivitis. Currently available medications have several different proposed methods of action (anti-histamines and mast cell stabilizers). Most of the commercially available allergy eye drops are most effective when used daily, though it may take up to a week to experience maximum symptom relief. Some eye drops can be used only on an as needed basis, though you should discuss dosage and frequency with a doctor, when possible.

What options are available if anti-allergy eye drops are not helping?

Given the different methods of action across all the commercially available drops, sometimes what works well for one person may not work as well for another person. A trial of different types of eye drops may be necessary before you find one that works for your child. If symptoms persist even after trying multiple different kinds of allergy eye drops, adding an oral allergy medication may provide additional relief. This is also a good option for children who won't tolerate eye drops, or who have additional symptoms including a runny nose.

Are steroid eye drops okay for children?

Yes, in some cases, a short course of steroid eye drops along with allergy eye drops is required to treat a severe allergic reaction. Steroid use should be monitored closely by your child's ophthalmologist and used only as directed to prevent serious complications (see below).

Why can't steroid drops be used all the time?

Long-term or inappropriate use of steroid drops can cause serious vision problems, including [glaucoma](#) and [cataracts](#). A child on steroid drops needs to be monitored for these side effects. Only doctors who can monitor for side effects should prescribe steroids for allergic conjunctivitis. Consult your child's ophthalmologist for guidance about how long a steroid drop may be used.

Prognosis

Most children with allergic conjunctivitis do not experience significant visual consequences. However, complications can occur related to excessive eye rubbing, co-infections, or inappropriate steroid use.

What is vernal conjunctivitis?

Vernal conjunctivitis is a severe type of seasonal allergic conjunctivitis that is common in young boys. Often, patients also have asthma or eczema. Symptoms typically occur at the same time each year, but most patients eventually do grow out of this problem. Symptoms are commonly so severe that they require a short course of steroid eye drops in addition to an anti-allergy drop. Large conjunctival papillae are a classic sign of vernal conjunctivitis [See Figure 2]. Vernal conjunctivitis is more difficult to treat than other types of allergic conjunctivitis, and req



Fig. 2: Large conjunctival papillae on the underside of the upper eyelid of a patient with vernal conjunctivitis.