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Antibiotics for pink eye

When you need them—and when you don't

Pink eye is a common condition, especially in children. It is also called conjunctivitis. The eyes are pink because they are infected or irritated. They may be itchy and teary, with a watery discharge, and swollen, crusty eyelids.

Doctors often prescribe antibiotic eye drops or ointments for pink eye. But antibiotics don't usually help, according to the American Academy of Ophthalmology. They can do more harm than good. Here's why:

Antibiotics are not usually necessary for pink eye.

Pink eye can be caused by a virus, an allergy, or bacteria.

Pink eye is usually caused by a **virus**. Viral pink eye usually goes away on its own in a week or so. Antibiotics do not kill viruses.

Pink eye can also be an **allergic** reaction to something like pollen, dust mites, pets, contact lenses, or cosmetics. This kind of pink eye gets better when you avoid the things that are causing the allergy. Antibiotics don't help allergies.



A third type of pink eye is caused by **bacteria**. This can be helped by an antibiotic. However, mild bacterial pink eye almost always goes away within ten days without medication.

Antibiotics can cause problems.

Antibiotics can cause itching, stinging, burning, swelling and redness. They can cause more discharge. And they can cause allergic reactions in some people.

Antibiotics can be a waste of money.

Generic antibiotic drops and ointments can cost \$12 to \$60. For newer, brand name drugs, you can pay over \$130. And if you have an antibiotic-resistant infection, you will need more doctor visits and costly medicines.

Who should use antibiotics for pink eye?

You might need antibiotic eye drops and ointments for bacterial pink eye if:

- Your symptoms are severe.
- Your immune system is weak. This might happen if you have another illness.
- Your infection does not get better in a week without treatment.

Know the symptoms of different kinds of pink eye.

- **Viral pink eye:** Symptoms can include watery eyes along with a cold, flu, or sore throat.
- **Allergic pink eye:** Symptoms include itchy eyes, swollen eyelids and a runny or itchy nose. It is more common in people who have other allergies, such as hay fever or asthma.
- **Bacterial pink eye:** Symptoms include a thick, often yellow-green discharge that lasts all day (usually not with a cold or flu).

Advice from Consumer Reports

Steps to help manage pink eye and prevent it from spreading

Soothe pink eye.

- Use a clean, cool, wet compress. Cooled artificial tears (over-the-counter) may help.
- Allergic pink eye can be helped by cooled antihistamine eye drops (prescription or over-the-counter). Keep windows closed during hay-fever season.

Pink eye is very contagious. Try to avoid spreading it.

- Wash hands often or use an alcohol-based hand sanitizer.
- Don't touch your eyes.
- Don't use contact lenses.
- Don't re-use washcloths or tissues.
- Change pillowcases often.
- Wash sheets and towels in hot water and detergent.
- Clean or replace eyewear and make-up that could be infected.

Call the doctor if:

- You have eye pain or vision problems, or if you are very sensitive to light.
- You had glaucoma surgery in the past.
- You took antibiotics for bacterial pink eye and it doesn't improve in three to four days.
- You have viral pink eye that gets worse after a week.

This report is for you to use when talking with your health-care provider. It is not a substitute for medical advice and treatment. Use of this report is at your own risk.

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