

What You Need to Know About ...

# Allergic Conjunctivitis



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2011

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## What is allergic conjunctivitis?

Allergic conjunctivitis, also known as ocular or eye allergy, is inflammation of the conjunctiva, which is the mucous membrane that covers the white part of the eye and the inside of the eyelids.<sup>1</sup> It is an immune response triggered by airborne substances that usually do not bother most people. These allergens cause the body to release a substance called histamine as a defense mechanism. Histamine causes the itching, redness, and tearing that are symptoms of allergic conjunctivitis.<sup>1</sup>

## Why do some people seem to have eye allergies all the time, but others only at certain times of the year?

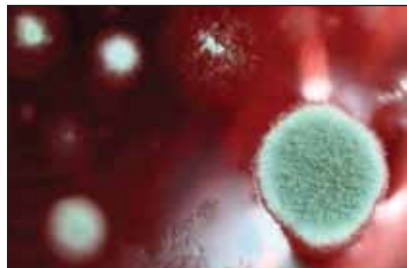
There are two types of allergic conjunctivitis: seasonal and perennial.<sup>1</sup> Seasonal allergic conjunctivitis, which is the most common type, usually occurs in early spring into summer and again in the fall.



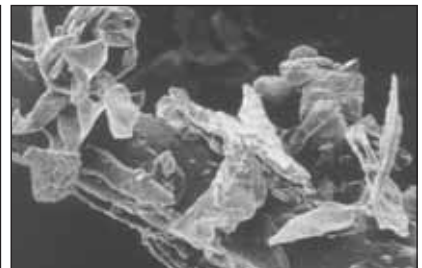
Pollen



Dust Mites



Mold Spores



Dander

Image courtesy of www.aafp.org

Perennial allergic conjunctivitis persists throughout the year. The symptoms of perennial allergic conjunctivitis are similar to those of seasonal allergic conjunctivitis, but they are usually more easily controlled.<sup>1</sup>

## What causes eye allergy?

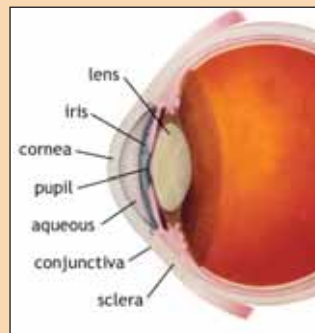
Seasonal allergic conjunctivitis is usually caused by pollen, which is released from grasses, trees, and other plants at certain times of

the year.<sup>2</sup> The primary cause of perennial allergic conjunctivitis, sometimes called indoor eye allergy, is dust mites.<sup>2</sup> These microscopic bugs feed on dead skin cells and are found in upholstered furniture, carpets, and bedding. Other substances that can trigger perennial allergic conjunctivitis include:

- **Mold**, which thrives in warm, moist, dark environments and is usually more prevalent in humid climates and during rainy weather.
- **Pet dander**, which is tiny flakes of skin shed by cats and dogs. Dander can be found throughout the house where a pet lives. Pet hair may not be an allergen itself, but it collects dander, pollen, mold spores, and dust, all of which can trigger allergic reactions, including eye allergies. Pet saliva is also a source of allergens, which are deposited on the fur through licking and urination.

### WHAT IS THE CONJUNCTIVA?

The conjunctiva is the clear mucous membrane that covers the inside of your eyelids and the exposed surface of your eye.<sup>3</sup> Red, tearing, itching, burning eyes and swollen eyelids are signs that these membranes are inflamed. The general term for this condition is *conjunctivitis*, which can be caused by bacteria, viruses, or allergies.



## What are the symptoms of allergic conjunctivitis?

Itching, redness, and tearing are the top three symptoms of allergic conjunctivitis. Itching is the hallmark symptom of allergic conjunctivitis.<sup>4</sup> A burning sensation and puffy eyelids are not unusual, and some people report that their eyes become sensitive to light. There also may be a stringy discharge present. Allergic conjunctivitis usually affects both eyes, and symptoms usually appear very soon after the eyes have come into contact with an allergen.



## If I have symptoms of eye allergy, will I need an allergy test?

Testing usually is not necessary. Generally, your eye doctor can diagnose allergic conjunctivitis by examining your eyes and asking you some questions. Regardless of what is causing your eye allergy symptoms, the treatment will be the same. If you have other types of allergy symptoms in addition to allergic conjunctivitis, your eye doctor may consult with an allergist, and testing may be recommended.

## Can eye allergy harm my vision?

The symptoms of allergic conjunctivitis can be very uncomfortable and disrupt your day-to-day activities, but they usually do not harm your eyes. Your vision may become blurry because of watery eyes, but once your symptoms

are under control or your allergy subsides, your vision should return to normal.

## Are eye allergies hereditary?

A hereditary link has not been confirmed, but people who have family members with allergies seem to be more susceptible to allergies in general.<sup>1</sup>

## Is allergic conjunctivitis the same as pink eye?

The term “pink eye” usually indicates a contagious infection from a virus or bacteria. Allergic conjunctivitis is caused by an allergy and is not contagious.

## How can I get relief from my eye allergy symptoms?

Your eye doctor can choose

### DOES TOBACCO SMOKE CAUSE EYE ALLERGY?

Tobacco smoke and other types of air pollution can trigger allergy-like symptoms, such as watery, burning eyes, but smoke and air pollution are irritants not allergens. In other words, you cannot be allergic to smoke, so an allergy medication will not relieve your symptoms. Smoke and air pollution can, however, cause existing allergy symptoms to become worse.



from several types of eye drops to treat your eye allergy, including some that are available with a prescription and others that are available over the counter. Your eye doctor will evaluate your symptoms and their severity and decide which medication or combination of treatments would be best to relieve your symptoms.

### Can I still wear my contact lenses while I'm using eye drops for my eye allergy?

Eye drops for allergy symptoms contain a preservative that can be absorbed into contact lenses, so you should wait 10 minutes after using your eye drops before inserting your contact lenses. Otherwise, you can wear your contact lenses as usual. There is

one caution, however: Do not wear your contact lenses if your eyes are unusually red.



### When is allergy season?

Spring and fall are generally considered allergy seasons, but depending on where you live, various types of pollens may be in the air almost year-round: tree pollen in spring and winter, grass pollen in summer, and ragweed and other flower pollens in fall.

## EYE ALLERGIES AND CONTACT LENSES

Even successful contact lens wearers may have problems wearing their lenses during allergy season. Airborne allergens can adhere to the lenses, causing discomfort. (NOTE: Never wear contact lenses when your eyes are red.) You may want to consider wearing daily disposable contact lenses during allergy season, if they are available in your prescription, so that you can begin each day with a fresh, clean lens.



For people with perennial allergic conjunctivitis—dust mites and pet dander are two major culprits—there is no such thing as allergy season. These individuals can have symptoms at any time, and it is possible for a person to have both seasonal and perennial allergic conjunctivitis.

### Can I prevent allergic conjunctivitis?

Prevention is the best strategy for many medical conditions, but for people with allergies, avoiding everything that triggers allergic reactions, particularly pollen and mold, may be difficult if not impossible. On the following pages are some suggestions for keeping your allergy symptoms in check.

### Are there some regions in the United States where allergies are more prevalent?

No place in the United States is free from allergies, but some places seem to be more allergy-prone than

others. The cities listed here have been named the top 10 allergy capitals for 2010 by the Asthma and Allergy Foundation of America. The rankings are based on scientific analysis of the following:

- pollen scores (airborne grass/tree/weed pollen and mold spores)
- number of allergy medications used per patient
- number of allergy specialists per patient

And the “winners” are:

1. Dayton, Ohio
2. Wichita, Kansas
3. Louisville, Kentucky
4. Knoxville, Tennessee
5. Jackson, Mississippi
6. McAllen, Texas
7. Madison, Wisconsin
8. Springfield, Illinois
9. St. Louis, Missouri
10. Oklahoma City, Oklahoma

### How can I allergy-proof my home?

You may not be able to eliminate all allergens from your home,

## Top 10 Allergy Capitals for 2010



Source: Asthma and Allergy Foundation of America.

but you can keep them under control so that your home is comfortable, even for people with eye allergies. Try the following:

- Vacuum furniture, carpeting, and window treatments once or twice a week, more often if you have pets. Use a vacuum cleaner with a HEPA filter. Be sure to dispose of the vacuum bag after use so that dust mites do not escape. Wear a mask when vacuuming to avoid inhaling allergens.
- If possible, replace carpeting with hardwood, tile, or linoleum flooring.
- Clean floors with a damp mop rather than dry dusting or sweeping.

- Keep pets out of the bedroom so you are not exposed to animal dander and other allergens clinging to your pet's fur while you sleep.
- Clean and disinfect areas where mold is likely to form, such as windowsills, frames, under sinks, and the corners of the bathroom.
- Use a dehumidifier to reduce the chance for mold to form, especially in damp, humid places such as basements.
- Wash bedding frequently, and use "mite-proof" covers for your pillows and mattress.
- When pollen counts are high,

close your windows and use air conditioning, which will filter the air. Be sure to replace air conditioner filters regularly. Avoid using window fans that can draw pollen and molds into the house.





## What can I do to minimize my symptoms during allergy season?

- Stay indoors when pollen counts are at their peak, usually during the mid-morning and early evening, and when wind is blowing pollens around. Do not open windows at night.
- Wear glasses or sunglasses when outdoors to protect your eyes from pollen.
- Wash your hands immediately after petting any animals.
- Do not hang laundry outside to dry; allergens cling to fabric.
- Avoid mowing the lawn, raking leaves, and gardening. If you must do these things, wear goggles and a pollen mask to help filter out allergens.
- After visiting friends with pets or being outdoors during

allergy season, shower and change your clothes right away to remove dander, pollen, or mold spores from your skin, hair, and clothing.

- Wash your hair at night before bedtime to rinse away allergens and avoid being exposed to them while sleeping.
- When traveling by car, keep the windows and vents closed.
- If possible, during the height of the pollen season where you live, take a vacation to a more pollen-free area, such as the beach.

## What is the simplest way to keep eye allergies under control?

Educate yourself about what causes eye allergies,

how to avoid allergens, and what to do when symptoms start. Your eye doctor is your best source of information about allergic conjunctivitis.

Together, you can decide on prevention strategies and a treatment plan that is right for you. ■



## Where can I get more information about eye allergies?\*

Listed here are some organizations that provide information about allergies, including allergic conjunctivitis:

### American Academy of Allergy, Asthma and Immunology

[www.aaaai.org](http://www.aaaai.org)

### Asthma and Allergy Foundation of America

[www.aafa.org](http://www.aafa.org)

### American Academy of Ophthalmology

[www.aao.org](http://www.aao.org)

### PubMed Health

<http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmedhealth/PMH0002026>

### American Association for Pediatric Ophthalmology and Strabismus

[www.aapos.org](http://www.aapos.org)

### U.S. Department of Health and Human Services

### National Institutes of Health National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases

[www.nlm.nih.gov](http://www.nlm.nih.gov)

### American College of Allergy, Asthma & Immunology

[www.acaai.org](http://www.acaai.org)

\*All sites accessed March 21, 2011.

## DID YOU KNOW?

- An estimated 50 million Americans have allergies, including indoor/outdoor, food, drug, latex, insect, skin and eye allergies.<sup>5</sup>
- Many people with allergies have more than one type of allergy.
- Allergy prevalence overall has been increasing since the early 1980s across all age, sex, and racial groups.
- A single ragweed plant can generate a million grains of pollen a day.
- Scientists have collected samples of ragweed pollen 400 miles out at sea and 2 miles high in the air.
- You can check the pollen count in your area at [www.pollen.com](http://www.pollen.com).

## References

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