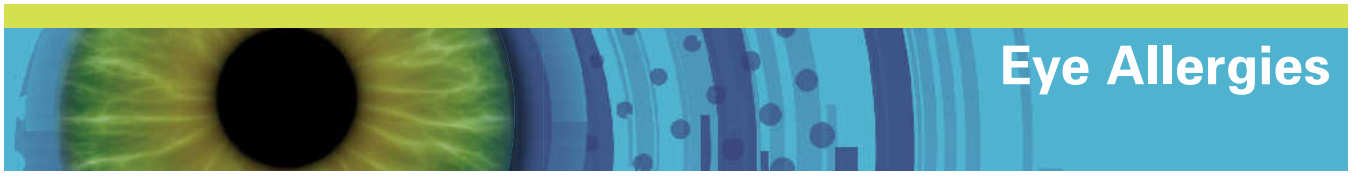


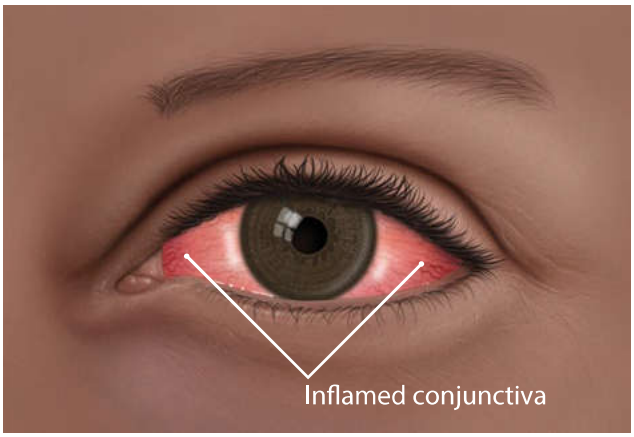
Eye Allergies

What are eye allergies?

Eye allergies, also called allergic conjunctivitis, are quite common. They occur when the eyes react to something that irritates them (called an allergen). The eyes produce a substance called histamine to fight off the allergen. As a result, the eyelids and conjunctiva become red, swollen and itchy. The eyes can tear and burn. Unlike other kinds of conjunctivitis, eye allergies are not spread from person to person.

People who have eye allergies usually have nasal allergies as well, with an itchy, stuffy nose and sneezing. It is usually a temporary condition associated with seasonal allergies.

You can get eye allergies from pet dander, dust, pollen, smoke, perfumes, or even foods. If you cannot avoid the cause, your allergies can be more severe. You can have significant burning and itching and even sensitivity to light.



Eye Words to Know

Conjunctiva: Clear tissue covering the white part of your eye and the inside of your eyelids.

Sclera: The outer layer of the eye. This is the "white" of the eye.

What are the symptoms of eye allergy?

The most common eye allergy symptoms include:

- red, swollen or itchy eyes
- burning or tearing of the eyes
- sensitivity to light

If accompanied by nasal allergies, you may also have a stuffy, itchy nose and sneezing. You can also have a headache, an itchy or sore throat or coughing.

What causes eye allergies?

An allergy is when the body's immune system reacts to an allergen that is normally harmless. When an allergen comes in contact with your eye, certain cells within your eye (called mast cells) release histamine and other substances to fight off the allergen. This reaction causes your eyes to become red, itchy and watery.

Allergens in the air — both indoors and out — cause many eye allergies. These allergens include:

- pollen from grass, trees and ragweed
- dust
- pet dander
- mold
- smoke

Allergic reactions to perfume, cosmetics or drugs can also cause the eyes to have an allergic response. Some people may be allergic to the preservative chemicals in lubricating eye drops or prescribed eye drops. They should use preservative-free drops instead if possible.

Sometimes, the eyes can react to other allergens that don't necessarily come in direct contact with the eye. These can include specific foods or insect bites or stings.

Some people inherit eye allergies from their parents. You're more likely to have allergies if both of your parents have them than if only one does.

How is an eye allergy diagnosed?

To provide proper treatment, your ophthalmologist will check to see if you have an eye infection or allergic conjunctivitis. They can usually diagnose allergic conjunctivitis easily. They will use a slit-lamp microscope to check for signs of eye allergies, such as swollen blood vessels on the surface of the eye. They will talk to you about your medical history and your family's history of allergies.

Your ophthalmologist may need to refer you to an allergy specialist for further testing if the cause of the allergy is not easily found.

Your ophthalmologist can usually diagnose allergic conjunctivitis easily. They will use a slit-lamp microscope to check for signs of eye allergies.

How is an eye allergy treated?

The key to treating eye allergies is to avoid or limit contact with the substance causing the problem. But you have to know what to avoid. If necessary, an allergist can perform a skin or blood test to help identify the specific allergen(s).

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Avoid allergens

If you are allergic to pollen, avoid going outdoors as much as possible when pollen counts are highest. Pollen counts are usually highest in the mid-morning and early evening. Also, avoid being outdoors when wind blows pollens around. When you are outdoors, sunglasses or eyeglasses can help to prevent pollen from getting into your eyes.

Keep your windows closed and use air conditioning, both in your car and home. This will help lower your exposure to pollen and other irritants while you are inside. Don't use window fans, as they draw the pollen and other allergens inside. Keep your air conditioning units clean so they won't cycle allergens inside.

If mold is an allergy trigger for you, recognize that high humidity can cause molds to grow. Aim to keep the humidity level in your home around 30 to 50 percent. Clean high-humidity areas like basements, bathrooms and kitchens often. Consider using a dehumidifier in particularly humid or moist places such as a basement.

If dust at home brings on your allergic conjunctivitis, try to keep dust mites away from your skin. Pay special attention to your bedroom. Use allergen-reducing covers for your bedding and especially for your pillows. Wash your bedding frequently with hot water that is at least 130 degrees Fahrenheit.

When cleaning floors, use a damp mop or rag instead of a dry dust mop or broom to trap the allergens.

If pets are a source of allergies for you, try to keep animals outside of the house as much as possible. It is particularly important not to allow a pet into your bedroom so that you can sleep in an allergen-free room. Consider hardwood or tile floors instead of carpeting, which traps the pet dander. Always wash your hands after touching a pet, and wash clothing that you have worn around pets.

Finally, always avoid rubbing your eyes, which only irritates them more.

Treating eye allergies with eye drops and medicine

Artificial tears. Artificial tear drops help relieve eye allergies temporarily by washing allergens from the eye. They also relieve dry, irritated eyes by adding moisture. You can use these drops, available without a prescription, up to six times a day. You may use them as often as you need to if they are preservative free.

Decongestants (with or without antihistamines). Decongestants reduce redness in the eyes from allergies. They are available as over-the-counter eye drops. If the decongestant eye drops you choose include an antihistamine, they can relieve itchiness as well. You should not use these types of eye drops for more than two to three days. Longer-term use actually increases your irritating symptoms.

Oral antihistamines. Oral antihistamines may be somewhat helpful in relieving itchy eyes. But they can make eyes dry and even worsen eye allergy symptoms.

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Antihistamine/mast-cell stabilizers. Eye drops with both an antihistamine to relieve itchiness and a mast-cell stabilizer help prevent eye allergies. You use them once or twice a day to relieve itching, redness, tearing and burning. How often you use them depends on which eye drop you choose.

Corticosteroids. Steroid eye drops can help treat chronic and severe eye allergy symptoms such as itching, redness and swelling.

Immunotherapy shots. If symptoms are not controlled by allergen avoidance, eye drops or medicine, immunotherapy (allergy shots) may be an option. With immunotherapy, you get shots containing tiny amounts of the allergen. The dose gradually increases over time to help your body become immune to the allergens.

Your doctor can help determine which treatments are best for you.

Summary

Eye allergies are quite common. They occur when the eyes react to something that irritates them. Common irritants include pollen, dust, pet dander, mold and smoke. Your eyelids and conjunctiva become red, swollen and itchy. The eyes can tear and burn. Eye allergies are usually easy to diagnose. The key to treating eye allergies is to avoid or limit contact with the things causing your irritation. Over-the-counter and prescription medicines can also help control your eye allergies.

Get more information about eye allergies from EyeSmart—provided by the American Academy of Ophthalmology—at **aao.org/allergies-link**.

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