

Patient Update

Are your allergies affecting your eyes?

If your eyes become itchy, watery and red, you may be suffering from eye allergies caused by trees, pollen, pet dander or other allergic triggers. These allergies, called allergic conjunctivitis, are often associated with allergic rhinitis (hayfever). In fact, more than 20 million Americans, 5% to 22% of the general population, have this condition.

Allergic conjunctivitis is an allergic reaction. An allergen is a foreign substance in the air that causes or triggers an abnormal reaction in the eye. The allergic reaction releases chemicals such as histamine, and causes symptoms, usually in both eyes, including:

- Itching (most common symptom)
- Redness
- Swelling
- Tearing

There are three types of eye allergies:

- **Seasonal allergic conjunctivitis** results from allergies to the pollen of trees, grasses and weeds. Approximately 80% of all eye allergies fall into this category.

- **Perennial allergic conjunctivitis** is similar to its seasonal counterpart, although usually milder. The symptoms are present all year and are related to allergens from animals, mold spores and dust mites. Both perennial and seasonal worsening of symptoms can occur in the same person causing “double trouble.”

- **Vernal keratoconjunctivitis** is a sight-threatening disease seen in children younger than 14 years of age, affecting boys twice as often as girls. It is more common in spring and fall, and in dry, warm climates. Common symptoms include inner lid discomfort, severe light sensitivity, or photophobia, excessive tearing with tenacious discharge, a sensation of a foreign body, and a “cobblestone” appearance of the inner portion of the eyelids.

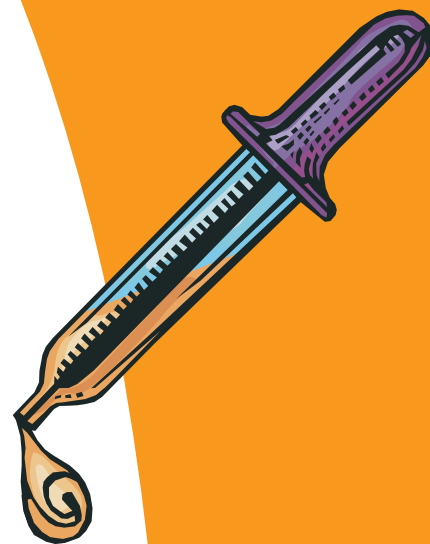
Prevention

Tips to prevent eye allergies include:

- Wash your hands often. This will help avoid rubbing your eyes when there are allergens on them such as pollen or pet dander.
- Keep windows closed at home and in the car to reduce pollen exposure.
- Change the air filters in your furnace monthly to minimize home contamination.
- Wear eye goggles while mowing the lawn to decrease pollen exposure.
- Clean your pets’ paws and fur when they come indoors so they don’t bring allergens into the home.
- Cover your mattress and pillows with special allergen-proof covers to help avoid dust mites.

Treatment for eye allergies

Avoidance is the main treatment, and that’s why it is important to identify contributing allergens. Work with an allergist/immunologist to identify the cause of your allergy. If necessary, the allergist/immunologist may recommend immunotherapy, also known as “allergy shots.” This process gradually helps your body build up a normal protection against the allergens that are causing your eye symptoms.



For more information on allergic conjunctivitis, visit the Patients and Consumers Center of the AAAAI Web site, www.aaaai.org, or talk to your allergist/immunologist.

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