Are Eye Allergies a Real Thing?

Itchy, watery, red eyes can be frustrating. You're not crying, but your eyes won't stop tearing up.

Rubbing them can make it worse, causing your eyelids to swell a bit. When your eyes get irritated like this, it may be an allergic reaction. In fact, you might experience eye allergies along with a runny or stuffy nose.

What's wrong with my eyes?

Allergic conjunctivitis happens when your eyes create an inflammatory histamine response to an environmental trigger. Your eyes could be irritated by dust, pet dander, feathers (in bedding), makeup, perfume, smoke, chlorine, bleach, air pollution, certain medicines, or contact lenses.

Or, these symptoms may hit you when flowers and trees are in bloom, which raises pollen levels. "Depending on an individual's specific allergies and what vegetation is in bloom at the moment, their symptoms will likely peak at a certain time of year and may last for a period of months," says Alison Bozung, O.D., FAAO, an optometrist with Bascom Palmer Eye Institute, part of the University of Miami Health System. Seasonal allergic conjunctivitis typically occurs spring through summer and into autumn. "Because South Florida doesn't have a true winter, the allergy season here can last the entire year."

If you can't figure out exactly what's triggering your allergic conjunctivitis, allergy testing may have the answer. Once you know what you're allergic to, you can avoid those allergens when possible or try immunotherapy (allergy injections or prescription pills) to provide long-term allergy relief.
How to relieve sore, inflamed eyes

- Avoid rubbing your eyes.
- Don't wear contact lenses when your eyes are irritated.
- Apply a cool compress over closed eyelids a couple of times a day.
- If sensitive to light, wear sunglasses outdoors, which can also help keep away dust and pollen.

**If you are allergic to dust mites:**

- Use specially designed pillow and mattress covers.
- Frequently clean bedding and towels.
- Mop the floor instead of sweeping dust into the air.

**If you are allergic to pet dander:**

- Wash your hands and face.
- Change your clothing immediately after interacting with dogs or cats.
- Don't let your pet into your bedroom.

**If you are allergic to pollen, air pollution, and other outdoor allergens:**

- Limit your outdoor exposure when it's windy.
- Close home and car windows.
- Use the air conditioner rather than a fan.

**If you are allergic to mold:**

- Use a dehumidifier.
- Reduce indoor humidity by running the air conditioner.
- Insert a HEPA filter in your air conditioner.
- Use bleach to clean kitchens and bathrooms.
- Wear gloves when cleaning kitchens and bathrooms.

**Which eye drops should I use?**

"Artificial tears can help flush the allergens and irritants from the surface of the eye," Dr. Bozung says. "I recommend starting with a brand name, over-the-counter, preservative-free artificial tear three to four times per day."

Try topical, over-the-counter (OTC) allergy eye drops with active ingredients, like ketotifen and olopatadine, she says. "These combine both antihistamine and mast cell-stabilizing components to help treat the condition more completely."

If you think you may have allergic conjunctivitis but haven't found relief from OTC remedies, make an appointment with an optometrist or ophthalmologist. "Clinical findings can typically help the doctor diagnose the condition accurately and start the best treatment regimen," she says.

"Your doctor may prescribe corticosteroid (anti-inflammatory) eye drops. These should be used under the supervision of an eye care provider, as they can have ocular side effects."

To cool and soothe inflamed eyes, you can store any eye drops in the refrigerator.
Could something else be the cause?

"Other forms of conjunctivitis are due to viral or bacterial infections (not allergies)," Dr. Bozung says. "Though they may present with redness and discharge, they typically lack itching and often start in just one eye. Blepharitis is another condition that can mimic allergic conjunctivitis, and is closely associated with dry eyes." Blepharitis can cause discomfort, burning, tearing, and itching of the eyes.

If you experience redness with severe eye pain, sensitivity to light, or vision loss, seek urgent care.

Dana Kantrowitz is a contributing writer for UMiami Health News.

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