

The Red Eye - Pink Eye
ERASE, St. Vincent Hospital and Health Services

Background:

A red eye is a common occurrence. There are many different terms used to describe the red eye, such as scleritis, but the most common ones used and known are often “blood-shot” eye and “pink eye.” Many red eye conditions are harmless, but there are a few conditions that cause a red eye which would require further attention by a physician. Below are some common conditions and symptoms and some additional signs that will help you decide if further examination of the eye by a physician, optometrist, or ophthalmologist is required.

Questions to ask yourself when you have a red eye:

1. Is just the white part of your eye red?
2. Have you recently injured your eye, such as having it poked, having it scratched?
3. Are your eyelids red also?
4. Do you have a fever?
5. Does the eye look pushed forward?
6. Do you have a history of glaucoma (“high eye pressure”)?
7. Is your vision blurry in the eye?
8. Can you see at all from that eye?
9. Does it involve one eye or both?
10. Is there anyone else you’ve come in contact with that has a red eye?
11. Is the eye painful or just itchy?
12. Do you see “halos” or other blurry objects from that eye?
13. Do you have a headache?
14. Do you currently have other cold or flu like symptoms, such as a runny nose?
15. Are your eyes feeling dry all the time?
16. Is there drainage from the eye, and if so, is it clear or thick like pus?
17. Do bright lights make your eye hurt?
18. Is there a discrete area of bright red blood in one area of the eye?

Common Causes for a red eye:

Pink eye - Most everyone as either had pink eye, been told they have pink eye, or known someone with pink eye. Pink eye is also known as conjunctivitis and can occur by itself or with a cold or flu. This is a bacterial or viral infection of the eye. Often the eye will be itchy with some drainage, either pus-like or clear. Many times, when you wake in the morning, the eye lids may be stuck together from the drainage that has dried overnight. Pink eye is very contagious, so often people with it have come in contact with another person with pink eye. Additionally, the eye may sometimes be sensitive to light. If the eye drainage is clear this is most likely viral conjunctivitis and applying a cool wet cloth over a closed eye several times a day will help with the itching and dissolve some of the “mattering” or dried drainage. Viral conjunctivitis will usually resolve on its own after a few days. If the drainage from the eye is thick and pus-like, this is most likely bacterial conjunctivitis and you should have a physician treat this eye. It is important to remember with both causes of pink eye that it is very contagious, so the best way to keep it from spreading to others is to wash your hands many times a day.

Blepharitis - This is a common condition involving redness of the eyelids. Often, the redness is along the edges of the eye lid and commonly there is a flaky material on the eye lashes. This condition is usually harmless and is helped by cool, moist compresses to the eye. Additionally, gently washing of the eyelids twice daily with non-tearing baby shampoo can help. It is important, however, that this condition should not be very painful or associated with any vision loss. If the eyelids are painful, especially if associated with a fever, you should see a physician immediately, as this could be a more serious condition.

Stye - A stye is a local inflammation of a hair follicle or gland on the eyelid. They often appear as a red, tender lump on the eyelid. A stye can often be treated with warm, moist compresses to the

eye. However, if the lump becomes very painful, the redness starts to spread around the eye lids, or you have a fever, you should see a physician for treatment. Additionally, if a stye continues to return to the same location multiple times, you should have it examined by a physician.

Subconjunctival hemorrhage - This is often seen as a focal “bloody” collection on the white part of the eye. It is often caused by coughing, sneezing, vomiting or vigorous rubbing of the eye. Many times, these develop during sleep and can be frightening to see in the morning. If you have had no injury to the eye, these will often resolve on their own. If accompanied with an injury, should see a physician.

Dry eyes - Irritation of the eye secondary to persistent dryness of the eye can also cause red eye. You can try using natural tears available at your local pharmacy; but if this condition continues, there could be something wrong with the drainage system of your eyes and a physician should be consulted.

Reasons to See a Physician Immediately:

Fever - If your red eye or red eyelids become associated with a fever, this could be a more serious infection of the eyelids or eye, see a physician as soon as possible.

Loss or decrease in vision - If you have a decrease in vision of the eye that does not improve with blinking or complete loss vision of the eye, see a physician immediately. If your red eye is accompanied with sudden complete loss of vision, this is an emergency and you should go to the nearest emergency department as soon as possible.

Pain and halos - If the eye becomes very painful and you are seeing halo or rainbow like visions from the eye, this could be a more serious condition called glaucoma and you need to see a physician immediately.

Pain around the eyelids with red colored skin - This could be a more serious infection of the skin called cellulitis and can be vision threatening. The eye may even look pushed forward which also requires immediate attention.

Injury to the eye - If you have injured the eye with a foreign object, you should always have the eye examined by a physician, especially if it feels like there is something still inside scratching the eye.

Headache - If your red eye is associated with a persistent headache, especially if you also notice your scalp is tender on the same side as the red eye, your jaw hurts and there is a change in vision in that eye, this could be a more serious condition called temporal arteritis and can lead to permanent vision loss in both eyes. Consult a physician immediately.

In Conclusion:

Hopefully this information has been helpful for evaluation of your red eye. However, this list is by no means complete. If your condition continues, even if your questions have been answered here, and you feel concerned about your red eye, you should contact your physician. Additionally, if you have a condition that impairs your immune system, have vision in only one eye, or wear contacts, your condition could potentially be more serious and should always be examined by a physician.

Online Resources:

<http://www.eyeatlas.com/>

<http://www.familydoctor.org/>

<http://www.webmd.com>

