

Conjunctivitis

Conjunctivitis is the medical term used to describe inflammation of the conjunctiva — the soft tissues that line the inside of the eyelids and the white portion of the eye. Conjunctivitis can occur as part of an upper respiratory tract infection, a condition that resembles a common cold. It can also be associated with a localized problem that causes trauma to or irritation of the eyes.

Environmental airborne irritants such as cigarette smoke, dust, or perfumes are some of the most common non-medical causes. Medical causes include systemic illnesses (illnesses that affect the whole body), dry eye (a medical condition characterized by inadequate tear production), entropion eye (a malformation of the eyelids that causes the edges of the lids to roll inward; the hairs on the eyelids scrape against the eye and cause irritation) or even trauma to the eye.

Symptoms:

- Discharge from the eyes (can be pus, watery, or thick, like mucus)
- Swollen eyelids
- Red, “bloodshot” eyes
- Squinting
- Rubbing the eyes with a paw or against other objects, such as furniture or the floor

If the conjunctivitis is severe, permanent damage to the cornea (the clear covering on the surface of the eye) can occur.

Diagnosis:

Diagnosis of conjunctivitis is usually based on physical examination findings. During the examination, your veterinarian will likely look for foreign material, wounds, or other causes of conjunctivitis. Entropion can also be diagnosed during the physical examination.

While examining the pet’s eyes, the veterinarian may use a Fluorescein (a green-tinted dye that glows under blue light). If the surface of the cornea is intact, the fluorescein dye will not stick to the eye. However, if there is a scratch, ulcer, or wound on the cornea, the dye adheres to the defect and can show your veterinarian where and how serious the injury is. Fluorescein staining is not painful and can provide valuable information about the condition of a pet’s eye.

Testing to determine if tear production is adequate is typical in cases where dry eye (keratoconjunctivitis sicca) is suspected. Similarly, if a systemic illness (such as FIV) is suspected, blood testing or other diagnostic tests may be recommended.

Treatment:

Most cases of conjunctivitis are treated with drops or ointments applied directly to the eyes. If the conjunctivitis is associated with another illness, like an upper respiratory infection, antibiotics or other medication given by mouth may also be recommended. In many cases, the eye starts looking better after only a few treatments. However, all medications should be given as directed for the full course of treatment.

If the conjunctivitis is associated with entropion, surgery may be recommended to correct the deformed eyelid. Similarly, if a pet has dry eye, long-term management may be recommended to control the condition.

Your veterinarian will typically recommend recheck exams during the course of treatment to monitor how well the condition is responding to therapy.