# Red eyes

Common causes, what you can do yourself, and when to get help quickly

## What is a red eye?

A red eye happens when tiny blood vessels on the white of the eye widen or leak. Most are minor and settle within two weeks, but a few need an eye specialist the same day.

## You might notice

- Redness on the white of the eye, in one eye or in both
- Itching, burning, or a gritty feeling like sand in the eye
- Pain, or bright light feeling uncomfortable to look at
- Watery, sticky or crusty eyes, often worse on waking
- Puffy, sore or red eyelids, sometimes with flaky lashes
- Blurred vision that does not clear when you blink

## What can cause a red eye

### Infection (conjunctivitis)

A virus or bacteria makes the eye red, sticky or watery. It spreads easily

### Allergy

Pollen, pets or dust cause itchy, watery eyes, usually both at once

### Dry eyes

Too few or poor-quality tears cause gritty, burning, tired eyes

### Sore eyelids (blepharitis)

Inflamed eyelid edges with crusty lashes and itchy, sore lids

### Burst blood vessel

A bright red patch on the white of the eye. Looks alarming, but painless

### Scratch or something in the eye

A scratch, grit or an eyelash causes pain, watering and blinking

### Contact lens problems

Infection or an ulcer under a lens. Take lenses out and get checked today

### Rarer but serious

Acute glaucoma, iritis (uveitis), corneal ulcer or scleritis: painful, blurry

## Who is more at risk

**Lens wearers** | **Hay fever** | **Contact with conjunctivitis** | **Screens or dry air**

**Blood thinners or high blood pressure** | **Arthritis or bowel inflammation**

Please turn over for how to look after your eyes, what the doctor will do and when to get help

# How you can help your eyes

**Wash your hands often.** Do not share towels, pillows or eye make-up.

**Clean sticky eyes.** Wipe gently with cooled boiled water and cotton wool.

**Try not to rub.** Rubbing makes redness, itching and soreness worse.

**Leave lenses out** until your eyes are back to normal, and bring them with you.

**Soothe your eyes.** A cool compress, or warm compresses for sore lids.

**Ask a pharmacist** about lubricating or allergy eye drops.

# What the doctor will do

1. Ask about your symptoms, lenses and any injury
2. Check your vision and look closely at both eyes
3. Use an orange dye drop to show any scratch or ulcer
4. Treat you, or arrange an urgent eye specialist visit

Tell us about contact lenses, recent eye surgery, or anything that hit or splashed your eye.

## Call 999 or go to A&E if

- A chemical splash: rinse with running water for 15 minutes
- Glass, metal or a fast object hits the eye
- Severe eye pain with headache and being sick
- Sudden loss of some or all of your sight

## Contact us the same day if

- Your eye is painful, not just gritty
- Blurred vision, or light hurts your eyes
- You wear lenses and your eye is red
- Something is stuck in your eye
- A baby under 4 weeks has red or sticky eyes

# Getting better

Most red eyes settle within one to two weeks, and conjunctivitis usually clears without antibiotics. Dry eyes and sore eyelids come and go, so daily care helps. Contact us if your eye is no better after a week or keeps coming back. Your local optometrist (optician) can also check eye problems free on the NHS in Scotland.

**Our GP by SRS Health Group**
14 Dudhope Street
Dundee DD1 1JU

**Contact us**
+44 7857 761328
care@ourgp.co.uk · ourgp.co.uk

**Out of hours**
NHS 24: call 111
Eye health: rnib.org.uk

Based on NICE CKS Red eye (2026) and BMJ Best Practice. October 2026.