

Acute Urticaria (Hives)

What are hives? Urticaria is another word for raised, red, itchy patches of skin that come and go. Individual hives may last from several minutes to about a day.

What causes hives? Allergy cells (mast cells) in the skin of people with urticaria are activated. These cells release chemicals, including histamine, that cause itching and swelling of small blood vessels. Fluid leaking from these blood vessels cause the welts.

Why do I get hives? Hives (urticaria) occur in 20% of the population at one time or another in their lives. Nothing can predict if a person will get hives. People with allergies or in families with allergies are somewhat more likely to get hives, but they can occur in anyone at any time. Hives are an allergic-like reaction of the skin to a usually harmless substance.

Acute Urticaria (Hives):

- Last anywhere from one day up to less than 6 weeks.
- Often a person with acute urticaria can identify a cause.
- Common Causes:
 - Viruses are the most common cause of acute hives in children.
 - Foods may cause hives within minutes to a few hours after eating.
 - Medications (especially antibiotics) may cause hives.
 - Allergy to a bee sting may cause hives quickly after a sting.
 - Insect bites can also cause hives.

Are hives dangerous? Generally no, but if associated with an allergic reaction to a food, medication or bee sting, they can be. Hives that come and go without other symptoms in an otherwise well child or adult are not an immediate concern.

- A whole body allergic reaction to something such as a food, medication or bee sting can rapidly trigger the skin allergy cells and can lead to a serious reaction called anaphylaxis.
- Other symptoms of anaphylaxis include difficulty breathing, difficulty swallowing, coughing, vomiting, swelling of the lips, tongue or face, and loss of consciousness.
- This condition is serious and always requires an emergency room visit.

- If there is a known allergy and a patient has an Epi-Pen, its use may be required. Your allergist or primary physician will direct you on proper use of an Epi-Pen.

What can be done for urticaria? Hives are uncomfortable but rarely pose a threat to the body. Acute urticaria gradually disappear when the cause is eliminated. No medication provides a cure for hives. Several medications can control symptoms until the hives disappear on their own.

- Antihistamines are usually safe and effective. You may be able to prevent symptoms by taking these every day.
- Corticosteroids may be needed for short term control of severe symptoms. Their side effects usually outweigh the benefits for long term treatment.

What can I do to help? Certain things make urticaria worse. **Avoid:**

- Heat (ex. From a hot shower) can often cause hives to worsen.
- NSAID medications: Aspirin, ibuprofen, Motrin, Alleve, Advil and related medications can also trigger symptoms.
 - Acetaminophen rarely triggers hives.
- Alcoholic drinks can sometimes worsen hives.
- Emotional stress may be an important trigger.