

Urticaria (Hives)

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

What caused hives? Allergy cells (mast cells) in the skin of people with urticarial 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 (urticarial) 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.

Different types of Urticaria:

1.) *Acute Urticaria (Hives)*: Last anywhere from one day up to less than 6 weeks. Often a person with acute urticarial can identify a cause. 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. The most common cause of acute hives in children is a virus.

2.) *Chronic Urticaria (Hives)*: Hives that come and go for more than six weeks. It is much more difficult to identify the cause of chronic urticaria. Although an infection, such as a cold, may trigger this immune response, a person cannot usually pinpoint the causing illness. Some evidence shows that this immune response can be linked to thyroid problems. Lab tests can evaluate this possible link. Rarely do we identify a treatable cause. Most chronic urticaria will resolve by itself within a few months to a few years.

What is a physical Urticaria? Environmental factors may trigger hives:

- Dermatographism is a word for hives that occur when the skin is scratched or stroked with a firm object. Approximately 5-10% of the normal population of adults and children has dermatographism.
- Pressure urticarial usually develops in areas of tight clothing (belts or elastics)

- Cold urticarial occurs when the skin is chilled. Exposed skin on a cold day or in contact with ice will develop hives. Swimming in a cold body of water (ocean, lake, cold pool) may cause a massive amount of hives.
- Cholinergic urticarial is a form of hives that occur when the skin is heated. Exercise can trigger this condition.
- Solar urticarial occurs on parts of the body exposed to the sun. This may occur within a few minutes of exposure.

Are Urticaria dangerous? Generally no. 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. This condition is a serious and always requires an emergency room visit. Hives that come and go without other symptoms in an otherwise well child or adult are not an immediate concern.

What can be done for Urticaria? Hives are uncomfortable but rarely pose a threat to the body, especially when they are chronic (lasting more than 6 weeks). Acute urticarial gradually disappear then the cause is eliminated. Chronic urticarial always go away, but this may take months or even years. 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 treatments.

What can I do to help? Certain things make Urticaria worse. Heat (ex. From a hot shower) can often cause hives to worsen. Aspirin, ibuprofen and related medications can also trigger symptoms (even though they are not the actual cause). Acetaminophen rarely triggers hives. Alcoholic drinks can sometimes worsen hives. Emotional stress may be an important trigger.