

## CENTRAL MASS ALLERGY & ASTHMA CARE

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### URTICARIA (Hives)

**What is urticaria?** Urticaria is another word for raised, red, itchy patches of skin that come and go. These patches may vary in size from that of a pencil eraser to a large plate and are called hives. Individual hives may last from several minutes to about a day. Because they may disappear from one part of the skin while appearing on another they may seem to be constant.

**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 does a person 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.

**Are there different kinds of urticaria?** Doctors have divided hives into two general categories to try to help with diagnosis and treatment, *acute* and *chronic*.

*Acute urticaria:* Sudden onset of hives that come and go for a short period of time is called acute urticaria. Hives in acute urticaria may come and go for less than a day to up to a few weeks. Often a person with acute urticaria can identify a cause. Foods, especially nuts, seafood and cow's milk may cause hives a few minutes to a few hours after eating. Medications, especially antibiotics and even aspirin may also cause hives shortly after taking them. Allergy to a bee sting also causes hives to occur quickly.

*Chronic urticaria:* When hives come and go for more than six weeks they are called chronic urticaria. It is much more difficult to identify the cause of chronic urticaria. Sometimes the body makes an immune response that triggers the skin allergy cells. 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 is similar to that which can cause some thyroid problems. Lab tests can provide clues to this immune response. They rarely identify a treatable cause.

**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. These hives are usually in the shape of lines. Itchy, dry, skin makes this condition worse.
- *Pressure urticaria* usually develops in areas of tight clothing such as belts or elastic.
- *Cold urticaria* occurs when the skin is chilled. Exposed skin on a cold day or contact with ice will develop urticaria. A plunge into a swimming pool or the ocean may cause a massive amount of hives.
- *Cholinergic urticaria* is a form of hives that occur when the skin is heated. Exercise can trigger this condition.
- *Solar urticaria* occurs on parts of the body exposed to the sun; this may occur within a few minutes after exposure.

**How can the cause of urticaria be identified?** The single most useful way to determine the cause of urticaria is the history. A sudden reaction shortly after eating an allergenic food such as a peanut can make the diagnosis easy. Often more detailed information about medications and other exposures is needed. Sometimes physical factors such as temperature or pressure will lead to hives. An allergist has training about which questions to ask. Lab tests may confirm an already suspected food or bee sting allergy. Generally allergy testing or blood testing alone does not discover the cause especially for chronic urticaria.

**What cause swelling episodes?** The same activated allergy cells in deeper layers of skin cause swelling (angioedema). This usually occurs in the lips or eye lids but may involve any part of the skin. Many people with hives have occasional angioedema, which is not itchy. Swelling episodes may occur in a person who never has hives. Especially when this occurs in other family members, a specific laboratory test can help find a treatable blood chemical abnormality.

**Is urticaria dangerous?** Generally, no. A whole body allergic reaction to something such as a food, medication or bee sting will rapidly trigger the skin allergy cells. However, other parts of the body such as the lungs and larger blood vessels may also be affected. When a person has rapid onset of hives along with wheezing, dizziness or other symptoms this is called *anaphylaxis*. This condition is serious and always requires an emergency visit.

**What can be done to cure urticaria?** Do not panic. Hives may be uncomfortable and disfiguring but rarely pose a threat to the body especially when they are chronic. Acute urticaria gradually disappears when the cause is eliminated. Chronic urticaria always goes away but this may take months or even years. No medication provides a sure cure for hives. Fortunately, several medications can control the symptoms until urticaria disappears on its own. Antihistamines are usually safe and effective. You may be able to prevent symptoms by taking these every day. Sometimes a doctor recommends two or more kinds of antihistamines at the same time. Corticosteroids may be needed for short-term control of severe symptoms. Their side effects usually outweigh benefits for the long-term. Many other medications have been tried with occasional success.

**What can I do to help?** Certain things can make urticaria worse. Heat, such as from a shower, often can cause an episode to flare. Aspirin, ibuprofen and related medications also can trigger symptoms even when they are not the major cause. Acetaminophen rarely triggers hives. Alcoholic drinks also sometimes make matters worse. Emotional stress may be very important but is difficult to control. Sometimes it is helpful to be aware of this so that you do not need to worry about other possibilities. Alternative therapies such as acupuncture or herbal remedies have not been proven to control urticaria. However, safe techniques such as stress management or meditation may be worth trying. Your allergies can help to answer any questions you may have about this frustrating problem.