

Urticaria (Hives)

Urticaria (or Hives) is a raised red rash that causes wheals on the skin. It is often extremely itchy. The wheals can appear on any part of the skin and typically come and go. Hives vary in size from as small as a pen tip to as large as a dinner plate. When large wheals occur deeper under the skin, the medical term is angioedema. Angioedema can occur with hives, and often causes the eyelids and lips to swell. If this occurs, you should seek emergency care right away, especially if you are having difficulty breathing. The vast majority of hives are only in the skin and not associated with these concerns.

All Urticaria (Hives) is acute initially. This means that the hives have been occurring for less than 6 weeks. Individual spots (hives/ wheals) generally last less than 24 hours. New spots may appear as old areas fade, so your rash may last for a few days or several weeks. When hives last longer than 6 weeks, this is called chronic urticaria. Chronic urticaria can be tough to treat and may last for years.

Common causes of acute urticaria are an allergy, infection, drug, or food, but many cases have an unknown cause. Some cases have a pretty obvious trigger (for example a certain food or a new medication). Hives typically occur within hours of consuming a culprit food or within a few days of starting a new medication. In kids especially, a virus/ infection may cause hives to occur. Sometimes the illness was so mild that you didn't know you were sick. Most often, we never identify or find the cause of acute hives, but they eventually just go away.

Chronic urticaria (hives lasting longer than 6 weeks) can be associated with some medical conditions; however the vast majority of chronic hives are idiopathic. This means that even with extensive testing we are not able to identify a cause for the hives. Often we are left managing the hives until they hopefully resolve. Chronic hives may last for years.

Antihistamines are the main treatment for most patients with hives. These medications can reduce itching, flatten the raised wheals, and potentially shorten the duration of the rash. There are several different types of antihistamines. Some are known as long acting antihistamines. These are less likely to cause drowsiness (i.e. Allegra, Claritin, Zyrtec, Xyzal). Some are shorter acting antihistamines (i.e. Benadryl, hydroxyzine and vistaril). These tend to give faster relief or improvement but wear off quickly and often cause drowsiness. We often recommend treatment with several antihistamines at one time.

In general, antihistamines should be taken on a DAILY basis as recommended by your provider. They should not be taken only when you are breaking out or symptomatic.

Certain things may tend to make hives worse- heat and stress for example. Aspirin and other NSAIDs (i.e. ibuprofen, motrin, advil, Goodies powder) can make hives worse and should be avoided if possible.

If hives still occur even with numerous antihistamines, we may discuss blood work or other options for treatment. Xolair is an injection that can be given for chronic idiopathic urticaria. Idiopathic urticaria is the most common type of chronic urticaria, and it is when the cause of the rash is unknown. This shot is given by the allergist and used in people who have hives not controlled by antihistamines or other medications.