

Hives

WHAT ARE HIVES?

Hives or welts (medically termed 'urticaria') are a red, itchy, raised skin rash that can look like a group of mosquito bites.

Hives are a common allergic reaction, which is the body's response to an allergen or 'trigger'. They are usually harmless to most people. Hives can occur anywhere on the body and can affect people of all ages. The rash can quickly change shape and come and go over a matter of minutes or hours. The rash may last for days.

WHAT CAUSES HIVES?

The reaction occurs when the body releases a naturally occurring chemical called histamine, which causes itching and swelling.

Hives may be the first sign of an allergy. Some people are born with allergies, while others can develop allergies at any time. Often the cause of hives is never found.

Common 'triggers' include:

- medications such as antibiotics, pain relievers, vaccines or herbal remedies
- foods such as seafood, eggs, nuts, dairy, food additives or preservatives
- insect bites
- chemicals such as cosmetics, household cleaners, rubber and dyes
- infections – especially viruses, sometimes after a high temperature (fever)
- emotional stress
- certain plants
- animals
- heat, cold or exercise.

WHAT ARE THE SYMPTOMS?

Symptoms can occur minutes to hours after being exposed to a trigger and usually include a skin rash and itching.

The rash consists of red bumps on the skin or raised lines (wheals) that have a red margin and pale centre. The bumps appear in groups and can join to form large irregular swellings. New areas can appear as old areas fade.

While hives can occur anywhere on the body, the usual areas are the trunk (chest, stomach and back), throat, face, arms and legs.

TREATMENT

Most hives will resolve without any treatment. It is important to avoid the 'trigger' that caused the hives in the first instance, if known.

There are several medications that may be used to treat hives:

- Antihistamines such as promethazine (Phenergan), cetirizine (Zyrtec), fexofenadine (Telfast) or loratadine (Claratyne) relieve itching. Some cause drowsiness. If affected, do not drive or operate machinery. If in doubt, ask your doctor or pharmacist.
- Corticosteroids such as prednisolone reduce the swelling and rash.

Always follow the instructions on the packaging and use only as directed.

HOME CARE

- Apply a face washer soaked in cool water to relieve the itching and stinging.

- Try a lukewarm shower. Some people may find that heat makes the itching worse.
- Wear loose clothing.
- If possible, identify and avoid the trigger.

WHAT TO EXPECT

Hives are unpleasant but harmless. Symptoms usually settle within a few days.

Sometimes the rash lasts for days or weeks and may require tests and further treatment.

For some people, each attack of hives will become more severe. Avoiding the trigger is important.

If you do not get better in 24–48 hours or you have any other concerns, see your local doctor. You may need to be referred to an allergy specialist.

ANAPHYLAXIS

Anaphylaxis is a severe allergic reaction. It is rare but can cause swelling of the inside of the throat (the airway), asthma-like breathing problems or very low blood pressure. It can be life-threatening. If you have a severe reaction, particularly one affecting your breathing or making you feel faint, call an ambulance immediately by dialling triple zero (000).

If you have an anaphylactic reaction you may be advised to carry self-injectable adrenaline (called an EpiPen). You may also want to wear a bracelet or disc that highlights the substance you are allergic to. Ask your local doctor or pharmacist for advice.

Seeking help

In a medical emergency call an ambulance – dial triple zero (000).

With hives, it is a medical emergency if you:

- have problems breathing
- experience a choking sensation
- have swelling that involves your lips, tongue and throat
- become pale and sweaty
- collapse.

For other medical problems see your local doctor or healthcare professional.

For health advice from a registered nurse you can call NURSE-ON-CALL 24 hours a day on 1300 60 60 24 for the cost of a local call from anywhere in Victoria.*

NURSE-ON-CALL provides access to interpreting services for callers not confident with English.

* Calls from mobiles may be charged at a higher rate.

WANT TO KNOW MORE?

- Ask your local doctor or healthcare professional.
- Visit the Better Health Channel at www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au.
- See ASCIA Australian Society of Clinical Immunology and Allergy at www.allergy.org.au

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