

HIVES (URTICARIA)

Hives (or urticaria) are pale, itchy red bumps or swellings in the skin that occur as a result of allergic reactions to a wide variety of allergens or irritants (including foods, medications, infections, insect bites or stings, chemicals, stress and even things like cold and heat). Hives can be bumps as small as a quarter-inch in diameter, or they can coalesce into large raised areas, sometimes as large as a frisbee. When an outbreak of hives progresses to the point that there is swelling of the eyelids, lips and or even inside the mouth, it is often called “angioedema.” The most severe systemic allergic reactions, with wheezing and a drop in blood pressure, are called “anaphylaxis” or “anaphylactic reactions.” Hives can go away in a matter of minutes or hours, can come and go based upon exposure, or can go on for days, weeks or months (chronic urticaria).



Hives are caused by a release of allergy mediators (histamines, leukotrienes, bradykinins, slow-reacting substance, others) into the tissue layers of the skin. Allergy-mediator cells called “mast cells” come into contact with specific allergans and then release these allergy mediators from granules inside the cell. The substances cause swelling of the soft tissues (edema), and hives result.

Finding the trigger of your hives can be a real challenge for your healthcare provider. Sometimes the cause is obvious (“Doctor, I know that I am allergic to strawberries but I just couldn’t resist that slice of pie” or “You know, the last time I got hives I was also on an antibiotic and I think it was also Amoxicillin”). But many times, the cause is more elusive. Keeping a diary of foods, medicines and activities that were taken/occurred 1-2 hours before the hives appeared can often be helpful in looking for a pattern and tracking down the cause. However, if the hives persist or recur, it is often necessary to see an allergist for further testing. If hives are accompanied by oral swelling, wheezing or shortness of breath, you should seek immediate emergency medical care.

Even if the cause is not immediately known, there are a variety of medications that can help with symptoms. Your healthcare provider will help you decide which medications will work best for you. These include both over-the-counter and prescription medications, including:

- Antihistamines, including diphenhydramine (Benadryl), fexofenadine (Allegra), loratidine (Claritin) and cetirizine (Zyrtec). Antihistamines, particularly the over the counter brands (diphenhydramine and others) can cause drowsiness, and this drowsiness is intensified by alcohol and other sedatives. Care must be taken when using these medications and driving or operating machinery. Be sure to read the label carefully, and ask your healthcare provider or pharmacist if unsure.

- Corticosteroid medications, by pill or injection, including prednisone and prednisolone
- Histamine (H2) blocking medications, usually used for ulcers and acid reflux diseases but also helpful in hives, including cimetidine (Tagamet), famotidine (Pepcid) and ranitidine (Zantac)
- Epinephrine (adrenaline) by injection, either by a healthcare provider or in a self-administration syringe (EpiPen) for angioedema and anaphylaxis

Of course, the best approach to hives is avoidance. If you know what causes them, stay away from it!

Michael J. Huey, MD, March 2004

Helpful Links:

The American Academy of Dermatology web site at
<http://www.aad.org/pamphlets/Urticaria.html>

The Emory Healthcare health topics website at
<http://healthinfo.healthgate.com/GetContent.aspx?token=8482e079-8512-47c2-960c-a403c77a5e4c&chunkid=11779> .

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