

Hives

What are hives?

Hives are raised, red, itchy areas on the skin (also called wheals or welts) that can result from an allergic reaction.

The medical term for hives is urticaria.

What is the cause?

Clusters of hives may appear as a reaction to an allergen such as food, medicine, or an insect bite or sting. Hives may also occur as a reaction to infection or emotional stress. Histamine, a chemical your body makes, is released in response to the irritant that causes the hives to form. Histamine causes the redness, swelling, and itching. Often the cause of the hives cannot be determined.

What are the symptoms?

The raised, red, itchy areas may vary in size and shape. You may have one or many hives. The hives may appear on any part of the body. They are most common on the arms, legs, and trunk. You may have red blotches on your face. The rash may last for a few minutes or several days. Hives can be uncomfortable and they may recur.

In the case of a severe reaction—to a bee sting, for example—your face and throat may swell and you may need emergency treatment. Rarely, hives may cause problems with breathing, creating the danger of a severe asthma attack or a closing of the throat from swelling, which can be life-threatening.

How is it diagnosed?

Your provider will ask about your symptoms and medical history and examine you. Your provider will ask about your history of sensitivity to such things as:

- Foods (especially eggs, shellfish, milk, peanuts, tree nuts, berries, dyes or other additives)
- Medicines (such as penicillin, aspirin, or sulfa drugs)
- Plants (such as nettles) and pollens
- Animals, such as an allergy to cats
- Insect bites or stings
- Exposure to heat, cold, or sunshine

To find the cause of your hives, your provider may suggest that you:

- Keep a detailed diary of everything you eat, drink, take as medicine, or are exposed to for 2 to 4 weeks.
- Avoid foods, one at a time, to which you may be allergic.

It is easiest to identify drugs, foods, or plants that may cause you to have hives because the reaction usually happens within minutes or an hour. Identifying

triggers such as emotional stress or multiple allergies may take more time. Identifying multiple allergies may require skin tests or other types of allergy tests.

How is it treated?

The treatment your healthcare provider recommends will depend on how serious your hives are. He or she may suggest that you do one or more of the following to relieve the itching and reduce the swelling:

- Soak in a lukewarm bath or use cool compresses.
- Avoid heat or rubbing, which releases more histamines.
- Take antihistamine medicine as directed by the label or by your provider to reduce your allergic response.

If the rash is severe or not responding to the above treatments, your provider may prescribe an oral steroid medicine to take for a few days. Using a steroid for a long time can have serious side effects. Take steroid medicine exactly as your healthcare provider prescribes. Don't take more or less of it than prescribed by your provider and don't take it longer than prescribed. Don't stop taking a steroid without your provider's approval. You may have to lower your dosage slowly before stopping it.

Hives rarely cause emergencies. But sometimes they can cause throat swelling and trouble breathing. If your throat is swelling or you are having trouble breathing or are wheezing, call 911. Once you are getting medical care, you will be given a shot of epinephrine (adrenaline) to stop the reaction. When the emergency symptoms have been treated, you will probably be given steroid medicine to take for the next several days to make sure the hives go away completely.

Once the hives have gone and you are feeling better, you should see your healthcare provider to talk about whether you need tests to find what caused the hives. If you are able to find the cause, the best prevention is avoiding the cause, if that's possible. Whether you are able to learn the cause or not, if hives are a frequent problem, you may need to take antihistamines every day to keep from getting them again. If you had a severe reaction, with throat swelling and trouble breathing, you should ask your healthcare provider if you need an emergency epinephrine kit. This medicine kit lets you or a family member give you a shot of epinephrine while you are getting to or are waiting for medical help to arrive.

How long will the effects last?

The itching, swelling, and redness of hives can last hours to several weeks or months. In most cases the hives eventually go away without treatment, but taking drugs such as antihistamines or a steroid help the hives go away faster. The medicines also treat the itching and usually prevent new hives.

Chronic hives last a longer time. Often it's not possible to find their cause. The hives may go away on their own after weeks or months, but they may come back repeatedly. This can be very frustrating and very uncomfortable. It is important

to see your healthcare provider for follow-up so you can let your provider know what is or isn't working. It's also important to make sure there is no underlying cause, such as infection, but most of the time there is no explanation for the repeated hives.

How can I take care of myself?

- Call 911 right away for emergency medical care if you have an allergic reaction that affects your breathing, your throat feels tight, or your face begins to swell around the eyes, lips, or tongue.
- Take antihistamines or other medicines to help relieve your symptoms. Be sure to ask your healthcare provider or pharmacist about possible side effects or drug interactions with any other medicines you are taking.
- Avoid foods that seem to cause you to break out in hives.
- See your healthcare provider if you continue to have outbreaks of hives.
- If you have a known severe allergy, such as to bee stings or to a food such as peanuts, ask your provider about carrying emergency epinephrine. EpiPen and Twinject are single-dose injection kits of epinephrine. You or your family member can use the kit to give you a shot if you have a severe allergic reaction. The medicine will slow the allergic reaction until medical help arrives.
- Wear a medical ID bracelet or necklace that indicates your allergies and risk of a severe reaction. This can help ensure prompt and proper treatment during an emergency.

How can I help prevent hives?

If you know the cause of your hives, you should take steps to avoid the cause. You may need to take frequent, even daily, doses of antihistamine to prevent recurrences.

Developed by RelayHealth.

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