

UNIVERSITY STUDENT HEALTH SERVICES • Fact Sheet

HIVES (Urticaria)**WHAT ARE HIVES?**

Hives are raised, red, itchy areas of the skin (also called “wheals” or “welts”) often caused by an allergic reaction. The medical term for hives is “urticaria”. Hives can be classified as acute or chronic:

- ❖ **Acute hives** are the most common type. They usually appear suddenly and disappear within a few hours. However, symptoms can last anywhere from a few minutes to 2 weeks.
- ❖ **Chronic hives** occur daily or almost daily for at least 6 weeks; some will come and go intermittently for years. However, chronic hives are usually not permanent. Almost 50% of people are symptom-free within one year.

WHAT CAUSES HIVES?

Hives are the result of the immune system’s activation of mast cells, which release a chemical called histamine. Histamine causes the redness, swelling, and itching associated with hives. Any number of irritants or triggers can activate this immune response. Often, no specific cause can be identified.

- ❖ **Acute hives** are usually caused by an allergic reaction to a specific substance or trigger. Common examples include:
 - Foods (especially eggs, shellfish, nuts, berries, milk, dyes, or other additives); food-associated hives usually appear within 30 minutes of eating the offending agent.
 - Medicines (such as aspirin, penicillin, sulfa drugs, etc).
 - Common allergens (like insect bites/stings, animal fur, latex, etc).
 - New soaps, detergents, lotions, make-up, etc.
 - Viral infections (especially in children); hives often appear as the immune system begins to clear the infection, sometimes a week or more after the onset of illness; these hives usually resolve on their own in 1-2 weeks.
- ❖ **Chronic hives** are usually not caused by allergies. Most of the time, the cause is unknown. Researchers suspect that problems in the immune system contribute to symptoms. Though chronic hives can be frustrating, the condition is not contagious or life-threatening.

Some known causes of chronic hives include the following:

- Inducible hives are a subset of chronic hives. These hives are triggered by a variety of physical factors. Examples include:
 - Exposure to heat or cold (hives can appear as cold skin warms; sweating or heat may result in numerous tiny red hives).
 - Vibration (the palms of the hands may become red and itchy after driving a car).
 - Pressure (hives or swelling can appear on the palms or soles of the feet after carrying heavy objects or walking long distances).
 - Exercise (hives that appear during exercise may progress to a life-threatening allergic reaction; stopping exercise usually results in immediate improvement of symptoms; these types of hives are rare).
 - Exposure to sun or water (also rare causes of hives).
- Chronic hives may also be a sign of an underlying medication condition (such as lupus, cancer, liver disease, etc); however, other symptoms are usually present.

WHAT ARE THE SYMPTOMS?

Hives usually appear as raised, red areas of the skin that are intensely itchy.

- Hives vary in size and shape and are usually painless.
- They can appear on any part of the body. Common sites include the arms, legs, and trunk.

WHAT IS ANGIOEDEMA?

Angioedema is a severe allergic reaction that causes swelling in deeper layers of the skin. Up to one half of people with hives develop angioedema. Symptoms can include:

- Swelling of the face, eyelids, lips, ears, mouth, hands, feet, and/or genitalia.
- Swelling that is often worse on one side of the body.
- Swelling of the throat or tongue, which can be life-threatening if the airway becomes blocked and impairs breathing.

HOW ARE HIVES DIAGNOSED?

Hives are diagnosed based on their appearance. Your medical provider will also take a detailed history about possible exposures to identify a cause.

HOW ARE HIVES TREATED?

Treatment depends on the severity of symptoms. In most cases, hives will resolve without specific treatment, but medications are often used to help symptoms resolve faster. Medications can also prevent new hives from appearing.

Once symptoms are controlled, it is important to avoid any known triggers. If the cause is not clear, you may be asked to keep a diary of everything you eat, drink, take, and are exposed to for 2-4 weeks. In some cases, you may be referred to an allergist for further testing.

❖ Gentle Skin Care

- Soak in a lukewarm bath, or use cool compresses for symptom relief.
- Avoid heat or rubbing the skin, which can release more histamines and worsen symptoms.
- Wear loose cotton clothing. Avoid rough, tight, or scratchy material.

❖ Medications

- Oral antihistamines are the mainstay of treatment. They are used to decrease the allergic response and itching. Once symptoms are controlled, antihistamine medication should be continued daily for at least 1-3 months to prevent recurrences. Regular use of antihistamines may be necessary in patients with chronic hives.
 - Many patients take a non-sedating H1 antihistamine (such as Zyrtec, Claritin, or Allegra) once daily in the morning to control daytime symptoms and a sedating antihistamine (such as Benadryl) at bedtime, especially if symptoms are affecting sleep.
 - An H2 antihistamine, commonly used to treat heartburn, may also be prescribed simultaneously to control symptoms. Examples include ranitidine (150mg twice daily) and famotidine.
- Corticosteroid creams prescribed twice daily help reduce inflammation and itching. Only a thin layer of the medication is needed to be effective. Excessive or long-term use can cause thinning and whitening of the skin. Higher-dose creams should not be used on the face or neck unless specifically directed by your healthcare provider.
- Oral corticosteroids (such as prednisone) may be prescribed for a few days if the rash is severe or not responding to other treatments. These medications should be taken with food to avoid an upset stomach. They can cause insomnia if taken later in the day. Prolonged use of oral steroids should be avoided due to potential health risks.
- Epinephrine is an injection given in an emergency situation to treat angioedema and prevent airway problems. If you require an epinephrine injection in clinic, you will need further monitoring in the emergency room.

WHAT IF I HAVE A SERIOUS ALLERGIC REACTION?

Some allergic reactions can be life-threatening and require immediate medical attention.

If you are experiencing problems breathing, throat tightness, or swelling around the eyes and lips, call your healthcare provider or 911 immediately!

- ❖ **EpiPen:** If you have a known severe allergy, such as to bee stings or peanuts, your medical provider will prescribe an EpiPen to carry on your person. The EpiPen is a single-dose injection of epinephrine that you can give yourself to counteract a severe allergic reaction until medical help arrives. You should always call 911 after using your EpiPen.