

Help with Hives (Urticaria / Whelps)

Hives, also known as urticaria, affects about 20 percent of people at some time during their lifetime. Hives can start as itching, followed by swollen, red welts. Scratching, alcoholic beverages, exercise, and emotional stress may worsen the itching.

There are two types of hives, depending on how long they last:

- Acute urticaria: hives that last six weeks or less
- Chronic urticaria: hives that last or recur for more than six weeks.

What causes hives?

In general, the causes of acute and chronic hives are very different. Acute hives last six weeks and are generally caused by the following:

- Foods, especially peanuts, eggs, nuts and shellfish
- Medications such as aspirin and antibiotics (especially penicillin and sulfa)
- Insect bites or stings
- Blood transfusions
- Infections including common cold, urinary tract infections, strep throat, infectious mononucleosis and hepatitis, or other viral infections

In most of these cases, the hives resolve when the cause is avoided, removed or treated.

Chronic hives last more than six weeks. In many cases, the cause of chronic hives cannot be identified despite detailed history and testing. This condition is called idiopathic urticaria. The immune system is the cause of about 50 percent of hives that are not identified. In other cases, chronic hives may be associated with thyroid disease, other hormonal problems, or rarely cancer. In most cases, chronic hives will gradually disappear over time.

A type of chronic hives is “**physical urticaria**” in which hives can have one or more physical causes. These may include:

- Rubbing or scratching (**dermographism**). This is the most common reason for chronic hives. These hives appear within a few minutes along the path of rubbing or scratching and last less than an hour.
- Constant pressure (**pressure urticaria**). Hives can also appear as red swelling caused by belts and constrictive clothing such as sock bands.
- Change in temperature. Hives may be caused by heat or cold. Hives called **cold urticaria** are caused by exposure to low temperature followed by re-warming. This can be severe and life threatening if there is a general body cooling, for example after a plunge into a swimming pool.

Hives called cholinergic urticaria are due to an increase in body temperature with sweating, exercise, hot showers, and/or anxiety.

- Sun exposure (**solar urticaria**). Hives may occur within a few minutes after exposure to the sun.

Inflammation of the blood vessels, called vasculitis, can also cause hives. These hives are more painful than itchy. They may leave a bruise on the skin and often last more than 24 hours.

How are causes of hives identified?

In some cases, the cause is obvious – a person eats peanuts or shrimp, and then develops hives within a short period of time. In some cases, the cause cannot be identified.

When hives involve swelling of tongue or trouble breathing, immediate evaluation in the emergency room is required. A single episode of hives does not usually need extensive testing. If hives reoccurs, your doctor will evaluate possible causes. If food allergy is suspected, a diary of foods eaten within a few hours before the hives started may be extremely helpful.

Chronic hives should be evaluated by an allergist. The allergy specialist will take your detailed medical history and your family’s medical history. This will include exposures from your work and home environment, and current and recent medications. In some cases, you may need additional testing.

How are hives treated?

In most instances, hives will improve with medications such as antihistamines. They are effective, long-lasting (may be taken once a day), with few side effects. Frequently, your physician may try a combination of antihistamines. Severe episodes of urticaria may require temporary treatment with prednisone, a similar corticosteroid medication or immune modulator. If your hives involve swelling of the tongue or lips, or you have trouble breathing, an epinephrine self-injector will be prescribed for you to carry.

If the cause of hives can be identified, the best treatment is to avoid or eliminate it.

In most chronic urticaria, there is no external cause identified. Daily use of antihistamines is preferred to taking them only after a break out.

If you have any more questions, your allergist will be happy to answer them