

Hives (Urticaria)

Brown Health Services Patient Education Series

What are hives?

Hives, also known as urticaria, are a common skin reaction caused most often by exposure to allergens or other environmental factors. With hives, there is extreme itching of elevated, red skin areas. Sometimes swelling of the skin can also occur. Although triggers cannot often be determined, some common triggers include:

- food
- medication
- viral infection
- insect sting or bite
- environmental factors (sunlight, pressure, stress, heat, sweat)
- environmental allergens (pollen, mold, dust, animal dander)

The trigger(s) can activate special immune cells called mast cells that release the natural chemical, histamine. It is the histamine that causes the itching, redness, and swelling.

Note: Hives are *not* contagious. More than 20% of people get hives at some point in their life.

What are the symptoms of hives ?

Symptoms include:

- Severe itching
- Rash consists of raised pink bumps with pale centers
 - bumps can vary in shape and size

- bumps can sometimes merge together

- Rash tends to change location, size, and shape rapidly and repeatedly

Home Treatment

Hives generally come and go for a few days before disappearing. $\frac{2}{3}$ of cases resolve spontaneously. The following are a couple helpful interventions.

- *Antihistamine medication:*
 - Reduces itchiness
 - Decreases number of lesions
 - Continue taking 1-2 days after hives disappear.
 - Examples: Cetirizine (Zyrtec), loratadine (Claritin), fexofenadine (Allegra)
 - Diphenhydramine (Benadryl) is also very effective. However, it causes drowsiness, so is best taken before bed. Do not drive while taking this medication.
- *Avoidance:*
 - Avoid the trigger you know or suspect may have caused the hives.
 - Talk to a provider about discontinuing a medication that may be the culprit.

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- Hot showers, exercise, or tight clothing may make the hives worse if already present.

Note: If just localized hives, try washing the skin with soap and water.

When to Seek Immediate Emergency Care?

- Breathing becomes difficult Swallowing becomes difficult
- You start feeling ill (e.g., fever, chills, sweating, headache, muscle aches)

Contact Health Services or see a provider if:

- Symptoms worsen
- Most of the itch is not relieved after you have been taking an antihistamine for 24 hours.
- The hives last for more than one week.
- You have other concerns or questions.