

Hives

Emergency Department factsheets



What are hives?

Hives or welts (medically termed urticaria) are a red, itchy, raised skin rash, which can look like a group of mosquito bites.

It is a common allergic reaction, and can occur anywhere on the body. It can affect people of all ages. The rash can quickly change shape and come and go over a matter of minutes or hours. A rash may last for days.

What causes hives?

The reaction occurs when the body releases a naturally occurring chemical called histamine, which causes itching and swelling.

Hives may be the first sign of an allergy. Some people are born with allergies, while others can develop allergies at any time. Sometimes the cause of hives is never found.

Common 'triggers' include:

- medications such as antibiotics, painkillers, vaccines or herbal remedies
- foods such as seafood, eggs, nuts, dairy, food additives or preservatives
- insect bites
- chemicals such as cosmetics, household cleaners, rubber, dyes
- infections especially viruses, sometimes after a high temperature (fever)
- emotional stress
- certain plants
- animals
- heat, cold or exercise.

What are the symptoms?

Symptoms can occur minutes to hours after being exposed to a trigger and usually include a skin rash and itching.

The rash consists of red raised bumps on the skin or raised lines (wheals) that have a red margin and pale centre. The bumps appear in groups and can join to form large irregular swellings. New areas appear as old areas fade.

While hives can occur anywhere on the body, the usual areas are the trunk (chest), throat and face, arms and legs.

Treatment

There are several medications that may be used to treat hives.

- Antihistamines to relieve itching, such as Phenergan or Zyrtec. Some cause drowsiness – if affected do not drive or operate machinery.
- Corticosteroids to reduce the swelling and rash, such as Prednisolone.
- Anti-itch lotions, such as Calamine.
- Always follow the instructions on the packaging and use only as directed.

Home care

- Apply a face washer soaked in cool water to relieve the itching and stinging.
- Try a luke-warm shower. Some people may find that heat makes the itching worse.
- Wear loose clothing.
- If possible, identify and avoid the trigger.

What to expect

Hives are unpleasant but harmless. Symptoms usually settle within a few days.

Sometimes the rash lasts for days or weeks and may require tests and further treatment.

For most people, each attack of hives will become more severe. Avoiding the trigger is important.

If you do not get better in 24 to 48 hours or you have any other concerns, see your local doctor. You may need to be referred to an allergy specialist.

Anaphylaxis

Anaphylaxis is a severe allergic reaction. It is rare but can cause swelling of the throat and be life-threatening. If you have a severe reaction, call an ambulance immediately (dial 000).

If you have an anaphylactic reaction you may be advised to carry self-injectable adrenaline (called an EpiPen).

You may also want to wear a bracelet or disc that highlights the substance you are allergic to. Ask your local doctor or pharmacist for advice.

Seeking help

In a medical emergency, go to the nearest hospital emergency department or call an ambulance (dial 000).

With hives, it is a medical emergency if you have:

- problems breathing
- choking
- swelling that involves your lips, tongue and throat
- become pale and sweaty
- collapsed.

For other medical problems see your local doctor or health-care professional.

13 HEALTH (13 43 25 84) provides health information, referral and teletriage services to the public in all parts of Queensland and is available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, 365 days a year for the cost of a local call*.

*Calls from mobile phones may be charged at a higher rate. Please check with your telephone service provider

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