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Hives (Urticaria)

What are hives?

The medical term for hives is urticaria. Hives appear suddenly as itchy red blotches on the skin. Each spot usually lasts several hours but new spots may develop as the older ones fade. These spots can be of different sizes, and can sometimes burn or sting. A lot of swelling can occur when hives form around the eyes or lips. Hives usually go away within a few days to a few weeks. Some people have hives that come and go for years. Hives associated with trouble breathing may be life threatening and should be evaluated without delay in the closest emergency room.

What causes hives?

Hives are caused in part by the release of a chemical called histamine. Allergic reactions, chemicals in foods, medications and physical factors can cause histamine release. Sometimes it's impossible to find out why hives are forming. Below are some of the more common causes of hives.

Foods and beverages – The most common to cause hives are nuts, chocolate, fish (particularly shellfish), tomatoes, eggs, fresh berries and milk. Fresh foods cause hives more often than cooked foods. Food additives and preservatives may also be the problem (e.g., MSG[monosodium glutamate], sulfites). Hives may appear within minutes or up to several hours after eating.

Infections - Viral (eg., colds, hepatitis), fungal (yeast) and bacterial infections can cause hives.

Medications - Almost any prescription or over-the-counter medication can cause hives. These include antibiotics, aspirin and other pain medications, cold-remedies, laxatives, eye and eardrops, and vitamins. Tell Dr. McCauliffe about all of the medications you have been using, to help figure out what might be causing your hives.

Exposures – Exposures to a variety of agents can cause hives including, chemicals, detergents, soaps, skin lotions and creams, metal (particularly nickel), latex, rubber, clothing, dust, mold, pets, plants, and even water.

Physical factors - Hives can be caused by sunlight, cold, pressure, vibration, or exercise. Hives due to sunlight are called solar urticaria. This is a rare disorder in which hives form within minutes of sun exposure on exposed areas and fade within one to two hours. Hives can occur after cold exposure when the skin is warmed. This type of hives can be reproduced by briefly applying an ice cube to your skin. Hives can develop where pressure is applied against your skin, such as sites where elastic in clothing compresses your skin (e.g., around the waist or bra-line). Vibration-induced hives more commonly results from the use of power tools. Physical exertion can also induce hives, and rarely contact with water can do the same.

What is chronic urticaria?

Hives that continue to erupt for longer than six weeks are called "chronic urticaria". The cause of this type of hives is often difficult to identify. Dr. McCauliffe asks many questions in an attempt to find the possible cause. There are no specific tests for hives, and testing will depend on your medical history and examination. Although lab tests are often of little value, they sometimes reveal an underlying cause of the hives.

How can I treat my hives?

The best treatment is to find and remove the cause of the hives but identifying the cause is usually not an easy task. Antihistamine pills often provide some relief. Antihistamines work best if taken on a regular schedule to prevent hives from forming. No one antihistamine works best for everyone, so you may be asked to try more than one or different combinations, to find what works best for you. Some of the newer antihistamines (e.g., Claritin, Zyrtec and Allegra) cause less drowsiness, but aren't always as effective as the older sedating antihistamines like hydroxyzine (Atarax) or diphenhydramine (Benadryl). Sometimes, patients with more severe hives will be prescribed corticosteroid pills or shots. For chronic hives in people 12 years or older, omalizumab (Xolair) may be effective. Be aware that Xolair has some serious side effects and may increase the risk of getting certain types of cancer. A referral to an allergist is sometimes recommended.

