

## Think your hives are due to an allergy?

When to suspect allergy as a cause of hives:

- Episodes are rare.
- Episodes are short lived, lasting only a few hours.
- Episodes only occur under certain circumstances, for example, a couple of hours after eating or only with exercise.
- When more than one organ is involved. For example, hives with stomach cramps, vomiting, asthma/breathing difficulty or dizziness at the same time.

If you suspect allergy as a possible cause, you should write down any food or medicine or herbal remedy you have consumed in the previous 4 to 6 hours and then share the information with your doctor. This may help your doctor decide whether allergy is a likely cause. Allergy testing may be required to assist in diagnosis.

## When to worry about hives

Hives do not make you sick and they do not damage your liver or kidneys. There are times when you need to be concerned about hives. These include:

- If you are sick. For example, high fever, weight loss, arthritis, sore joints or bruising.
- If you have tongue or throat swelling.
- If a person has relatively rare short lived episodes which are severe and disappear within hours, the possibility of allergy should be considered in which case documenting what has been eaten or drunk in the previous 4 to 6 hours is important.
- If you swell on the inside of the mouth and you are worried about swallowing or breathing, you should seek urgent medical attention for treatment.

## How to help your doctor

Take photos. This is a great way to help your doctor decide what type of skin reaction you might be having especially if your appointment occurs when there is no visible rash. People are sometimes labelled as having urticaria/hives when in fact they have a completely different type of rash. If you suspect allergy as a cause of short lived episodes, document what you have ingested in the previous few hours.

For more helpful information on urticaria/hives go to ASCIA:  
[www.allergy.org.au/patients/skin-allergy/urticaria-hives](http://www.allergy.org.au/patients/skin-allergy/urticaria-hives)

For more information on allergy management contact Allergy & Anaphylaxis Australia

Call: 1300 728 000

Visit: [www.allergyfacts.org.au](http://www.allergyfacts.org.au)



You can also visit the peak medical organisation, the Australasian Society of Clinical Immunology and Allergy (ASCIA)

[www.allergy.org.au](http://www.allergy.org.au)

Always follow the treatment plan prescribed by your doctor. Contact your doctor if you have any questions or concerns. The information contained in this brochure is not medical advice.

This brochure was produced thanks to an unrestricted educational grant from Novartis Australia.

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ABN: 70 693 242 620

Do you suffer from  
Urticaria (Hives)?



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# Urticaria (Hives)

Hives are pink or red itchy rashes that may appear as lumps (wheals) or blotches on the skin. An estimated 10-20% of adults and children may experience hives at some time during their life. Hives can be as small as a pinhead or as large as a dinner plate and are often mistaken for a mosquito bite when they first start to appear. Swellings can last from as little as minutes or hours to days or weeks at a time. When hives persist for most days of the week, for longer than six weeks, this is defined as "chronic" (ongoing) urticaria and requires your doctor's advice.

## Presentation of hives

It is important to know that all hives look much the same regardless of the cause. The hives that occur after an infection look the same as the rash that might occur after an allergic reaction to food or medicine. Information on what was happening at the time the hives occurred and how long the hives lasted helps doctors decide what the potential cause may be.



## Causes of hives

The skin swelling seen in hives is due to the release of chemicals such as histamine from mast cells in the skin. Histamine irritates nerve endings that trigger itching and causes small blood vessels to leak fluid, causing swelling. When swelling occurs in the top layers of the skin it is referred to as hives, but when it develops in the deeper layers of the skin it is commonly called angioedema. Angioedema often feels tight and painful rather than itchy, may not respond well to antihistamines and can trigger larger swelling that may last longer than hives.

## How long do hives last?

Hives can last from days to decades, but most disappear within a few weeks. If hives last for less than six weeks, it is called acute urticaria. If hives last longer than six weeks, it is called chronic or ongoing urticaria and you should seek specialist advice.

## Types of hives

**Acute urticaria (hives):** Hives can appear on various parts of the body and within a matter of hours, fade without scarring. There are many causes including allergic reactions to food, medicine or insect stings. In young children, the most common trigger is infection such as a virus.

**Chronic urticaria (hives):** Chronic urticaria is also characterised by the occurrence of hives that tend to fade within a few hours without scarring. However, patients with chronic urticaria may experience symptoms with or without an identifiable trigger. This difference leads to two subtypes of chronic urticaria, both of which require specialist medical advice:

- Spontaneous hives: They appear to come and go with no identifiable trigger. Hives occur on most days of the week for six weeks or more. The hives may be accompanied by angioedema in some cases.
- Physical hives: These need some type of physical trigger to bring them on. This might be scratching, the pressure from tight clothing, exposure to sun or water, exercise and sometimes cold. Cold induced hives can be quite severe, especially when swimming in cool water.

## Testing for hives

Allergy testing may be recommended if the history strongly suggests an allergic cause for hives. Sometimes blood tests will be recommended to exclude underlying disease as a contributor to ongoing symptoms. Fortunately, serious underlying disease is a very rare cause of symptoms but may be suspected if hives are accompanied by bruising, bleeding into the skin, high fever, sore joints or persistent lumps in the skin. If you are worried, you should seek medical advice as soon as possible.

## Management of hives

Whilst most hives resolve within a couple of weeks without any specific treatment, the following measures may be useful:

- Avoid aggravating factors - Excessive heat, spicy foods, tight fitting clothing, stressful environments or alcohol. Have cooler showers and wear loose fitting clothing. Aspirin and other non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs should also be avoided as they often make the severity of hives worse within an hour or so of taking them.



- Treatment - Non-drowsy antihistamines are the major treatment for hives. They don't cure, but like blood pressure or cholesterol tablets they suppress the severity and frequency of symptoms. Steroids are generally reserved for severe hives because prolonged use can trigger side-effects. There are many other medicines which can be used when simple measures do not work. If you find that across the counter antihistamines are not effective, you should seek medical advice, especially if symptoms are severe and you feel unwell. If you are getting tongue or throat swelling call triple zero for an ambulance.
- Dietary manipulation - A low chemical diet is sometimes recommended for people whose hives are regular and last for many months at a time. Unfortunately, there is no test to prove or disprove whether it will work other than to try changing the diet with a dietician to guide you. Importantly, this is best done with a dietician for a short period of time to see if it helps.