



HIVES (URTICARIA)

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WHAT ARE HIVES?

Hives (urticaria) are raised, red, itchy patches of skin called wheals or welts. They usually have red borders and pale centers. Hives range in size from ¼ inch to 3 inches across or more. They may seem to move from place to place on the skin. Several hives may join to form a large area of raised, reddened skin.

Hives may occur with swelling under the skin (angioedema), though swelling also may occur without hives. Swelling may hurt a bit, but it does not usually itch like hives. It can be dangerous if severe swelling affects your throat, but this is very rare. Hives are not contagious and cannot be spread to other people.

HOW LONG DO HIVES AND SWELLING LAST?

When hives and swelling last more than 6 weeks despite treatment, they are called “chronic.” A single spot of hives may last less than 36 hours, but the problem may come and go for weeks or months. In most people, the problem often lasts less than 1 year and almost always goes away within 5 years.

WHAT IS THE CAUSE OF HIVES?

In people who have hives for a few days or a few weeks, some possible causes include:

- Medicines, including over-the-counter drugs, vitamins, and herbal products as well as prescription medicines.
- Food allergies. Watch for symptoms that occur within 1 hour after eating a certain food (such as fish, shellfish, peanuts and other nuts, eggs, and berries). However, it may be slightly longer than 1 hour before hives appear.
- Infections, such as hepatitis, mononucleosis, and even the common cold.
- Allergic rhinitis, or hay fever.
- Physical factors such as scratching the skin, pressure on the skin, cold, heat, exercise, or sunlight.
- An autoimmune disorder. This is a problem with the body’s natural defense system.
- A variety of diseases.

In some cases, people who have ongoing problems with daily hives and swelling for more than 6 weeks, the cause is often not known. The most common possible causes of the ongoing chronic hives include:

- An autoimmune disorder. This is a problem with the body’s natural defense system.
- Physical factors such as scratching the skin, pressure on the skin, cold, heat, exercise, or sunlight.
- Other causes are less common.

WHAT CAN YOU DO AT HOME FOR HIVES AND SWELLING?

- If you know what causes your hives and swelling—such as a certain food or medicine—avoid it when you can. However, you may not know the cause.
- Use cool, wet cloths to soothe the itchy or painful area. A warm (not hot) bath or shower may also help.

WHEN SHOULD YOU CALL KAISER PERMANENTE?

- Hives occur with dizziness, wheezing, breathing problems, tightness in your chest, or swelling of the lips, tongue, or face. Call 911.
- Your throat is swelling, and it’s hard to breathe. Call 911.
- You get hives after you start a new medicine.
- Hives and swelling get worse, and your medicine does not help. You may need another type of medicine.