

Urticaria (Hives)

Urticaria, more commonly known as hives, is a condition where red welts or 'wheals' form on the skin. The welts can be swollen and itchy and may appear on any part of the skin. They range in size, and sometimes join up to form very large patches. Each individual welt usually lasts for a few hours before fading away. New welts may continue to develop as old ones disappear. An episode of hives usually lasts less than 6 weeks and is known as acute hives. However, some people have them for a longer period of time (called chronic hives). Hives are very common and anyone can get hives during their lifetime.

What causes hives?

Hives develop when a chemical called histamine is released from the cells that line your blood vessels in the skin. Histamine release causes the skin to react and form welts. The histamine release is triggered by an allergic reaction or exposure to other triggers. Hives are triggered by different things in different people.

The most common triggers for hives include:

- Some medicines: e.g. certain antibiotics and pain medications
- Foods: e.g. shellfish, nuts, eggs and citrus fruits
- Insect bites and stings: e.g. from bees or mosquitoes
- Infections and some illnesses: e.g. viral infections, thyroid disease
- Pollen from flowers or trees
- Exposure to animal fur
- Pressure on the skin or touching something you are allergic to: e.g. latex, certain chemicals
- Sun exposure (called solar urticaria)
- Exercise

Hives can develop within minutes of exposure to the trigger, or the reaction may take several hours to develop. Sometimes the cause of hives is not clear, especially in people who have chronic hives lasting many weeks or months.

What do hives look like?

Hives usually appear as raised red or pink areas on the skin. They may appear swollen and can occur alone or in a group, and can also cover a larger area of skin. Hives tend to be itchy, but may also sting or hurt. The welts may disappear after a short time but reappear again. Some people get hives repeatedly at the same locations on their body.

Sometimes large welts occur under the skin, causing the affected area to swell. This swelling is called angioedema. This often causes the lips, eyelids and throat to swell. When the throat swells it can be hard to breathe. This is a very serious situation and requires urgent medical attention.

How are hives diagnosed?

Your dermatologist usually diagnoses hives by the appearance of the welts on the skin. If the diagnosis is not clear your dermatologist may perform allergy tests on the skin, order blood tests, or take a scraping of affected skin (called a biopsy) to examine under a microscope.

Treatment

Non-drowsy antihistamines are the most common treatment for hives. They can help to reduce the itching.

Sometimes your dermatologist will prescribe other medications to use in combination with antihistamines. These include steroids, antibacterial creams and medicines that reduce swelling and redness.

In people who have more severe hives, e.g. swelling under the skin, difficulty breathing, you may need to have an injection of adrenalin as soon as possible to quickly get rid of the symptoms. People who know they are severely allergic to certain things like nuts will often carry an auto-injector (e.g. EpiPen) with them at all times. You can inject this yourself as soon as you notice the symptoms beginning. If you need one of these devices, your doctor will talk to you and your family about how to use it.

What else can I do about hives?

When hives are mild you may not require any treatment as they tend to settle down quickly on their own. Having a cool shower or placing a damp, cool cloth on the affected area can also help.

The important thing is to try to avoid whatever triggers your hives. For example, avoid eating any foods or using medications that have caused you to develop hives in the past, try to minimise exposure to animals if you are allergic to animal fur, etc.

If you get hives after eating certain foods, your dermatologist will give you further information about food intolerances.

Salicylate, Amine and MSG Diets

Foods listed in the High and Very High columns should be AVOIDED

Foods listed in capitals also contain AMINES

Foods listed with an asterisk (*) contain MSG

Sweets				
Negligible	Low	Moderate	High	Very High
Carob COCOA Maple Syrup White Sugar	Caramels Golden Syrup	Molasses		Honey Liquorice Peppermints
Herbs & Spices				
Negligible	Low	Moderate	High	Very High
	Garlic Malt Vinegar Parsley Saffron SOY SAUCE* TANDOORI Vanilla		Allspice Bay Leaf Cardamon Caraway Cinnamon Clove Ginger Nutmeg Pepper (Black) Pepper (White) Pimento WHITE VINEGAR	Aniseed Canella Cayenne Cumin Curry Dill Five Spice Garam Masala Mace MARMITE* Mint Mixed Herbs Mustard Oregano Paprika Rosemary Tarragon Tumeric VEGEMITE* WORCESTER SAUCE
Vegetables				
Negligible	Low	Moderate	High	Very High
Bamboo Shoot Cabbage Celery Lettuce Potato (Peeled) Swede Dried Beans Dried Peas Brown Lentils Red Lentils	Brussel Sprout Chive Choko Green Beans Green Peas LEEK Mungbean Sprout Red Cabbage Shallot	Asparagus Beetroot BROCCOLI* Carrot CAULIFLOWER Marrow MUSHROOM Onion Parsnip Pumpkin SPINACH Sweet Corn* Sweet Potato Turnip	Alfalfa Sprout BROADBEAN Cucumber EGGPLANT Watercress	Capsicum Champignon Chicory Endive GHERKIN Hot Pepper OLIVE Radish TOMATO PRODUCTS* Zucchini

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Drinks				
Negligible	Low	Moderate	High	Very High
<p>Coffee Decaffeinated</p> <p>Other AKTAVITE MILO OVALTINE</p> <p>Alcohol Gin Whisky Vodka</p>	<p>Coffee Harris Instant Bushells Instant Andronicus Bushells Turkish Robert Timmins Instant Pablo Instant</p> <p>Tea Camomile</p> <p>Cereal Coffee Ecco Bambu Danelion</p>	<p>Coffee Harris Mocha International Roast Instant Moccona Instant Nescafe Instant Reform (Cereal)</p> <p>Tea Decaffeinated Fruit Rosehip</p> <p>Other COKE Fruit Juice Rosehip Syrup</p> <p>Alcohol BEER BRANDY* CIDER SHERRY*</p>		<p>Tea All Brands Peppermint</p> <p>Cereal Coffee Nature's Cuppa</p> <p>Alcohol LIQUEUR* PORT* RUM* WINE*</p>
Fruit				
Negligible	Low	Moderate	High	Very High
<p>BANANA Pear Peeled</p>	<p>Golden Delicious Apple (Peeled) PAW PAW Pomegranate</p>	<p>Custard Apple FIG LEMON Loquat Pear (With Peel) Persimmon Red Delicious Apple Rhubarb Tamarillo</p>	<p>ADVOCADO Grapefruit Granny Smith Apple Jonathan Ap[ple KIWI FRUIT Lychee Mandarin Mulberry Nectarine PASSIONFRUIT Peach Tangelo Watermelon</p>	<p>Apricot Blackberry Blackcurrant Boysenberry Cherry Cranberry Currant DATE GRAPE* Guava Loganberry ORANGE PINEAPPLE PLUM PRUNE* Raisin Raspberry Redcurrant Rockmelon Strawberry Sultana Youngberry</p>