

# URTICARIA

## WHAT IT IS

Urticaria (hives) is a common type of skin rash with raised, skin-coloured to red bumps (welts or wheals) that are usually itchy but can also burn or sting.

About one in five people will experience urticaria at some time during their lives.

## CAUSES

A doctor will diagnose urticaria by asking about symptoms, taking a medical history and doing a physical examination and ordering further tests when necessary.

**Acute urticaria** can be caused by infections (including common colds or the flu), or by an allergic reaction to something.

Common agents that can trigger acute urticaria include:

- Foods such as nuts, eggs and shellfish
- Drugs such as antibiotics, acetylsalicylic acid (ASA) and ibuprofen
- Insect bites or stings
- Latex
- Pet dander
- Pollen and some plants
- Contrast dye

**Chronic urticaria** (lasting more than six weeks) is caused by an autoimmune disorder, when the immune system of the body malfunctions and releases histamine through various mechanisms.

Chronic urticaria is more common in adults and in women. It has been estimated that 20% to 30% of cases of acute urticaria in infants and young children will develop into chronic urticaria.



## SIGNS AND SYMPTOMS

Urticaria presents with itchy or burning, skin-coloured to red, swollen bumps. These bumps or areas have clearly defined borders and are usually smooth and slightly raised. When pressed, the centre of the bumps will turn white. The bumps may last for just a few minutes, or some may remain for many hours, then disappear within a day but then reappear elsewhere. After the bumps disappear, the skin usually looks completely normal. Each bump will usually resolve within 24 hours.

Urticaria can be accompanied with swelling under the skin that can sometimes affect the face, lips or throat. This is called angioedema. **You should urgently seek emergency medical care if urticaria is accompanied by angioedema and you have trouble swallowing or breathing.**

## TRIGGERS

Emotional stress is known to precipitate and exacerbate urticaria. Some patients break out in hives only when stressed, therefore, keeping stress levels down may be helpful to control the symptoms.

Physical triggers such as exposure to light, heat or cold, vibration, pressure to the skin, sweating and exercise can also cause a form of urticaria called **physical urticaria**.



## TREATMENT

Treatment will depend on the severity and cause of the urticaria. In most acute cases, the rash will go away on its own and no treatment is required. If an allergic cause is determined, you will be advised to avoid whatever has triggered the rash.

Showering or bathing in cool water, refraining from scratching, and wearing loose clothing may help relieve symptoms.

Relieving the itching associated with urticaria may involve taking medications including **oral antihistamines**, **oral corticosteroids** or **biologics**. Consult your doctor to discuss treatment options.

## TAKE-HOME MESSAGES

- 1 Urticaria is not contagious. You cannot catch it from somebody who is affected by the condition.
- 2 Up to half of urticaria cases have no identified cause. However, there are many treatments that can successfully manage urticaria and provide symptom relief.



**Additional information on Urticaria is available online.**

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