

HIVES (URTICARIA)

Hives are itching red welts or small bumps that last from 15 minutes to several hours. They usually appear suddenly and leave no trace when they disappear. Crops of hives may appear several times a day. They may come and go for days, weeks or months.

What causes hives?

Hives are often caused by something taken internally, most often a medicine such as penicillin or aspirin. Sometimes foods cause hives; shellfish and strawberries are well known examples. Hives may be caused by infections such as a viral flu or cold. Occasionally physical agents such as pressure or cold can cause hives. Usually the cause cannot be found. Fortunately, I can usually treat hives successfully -- even though their cause may remain a mystery.

Treatment

In treating your hives, the first goal is to find the cause. Medicine is prescribed to control the rash and itching.

Since the medicines are most common cause of hives, please list all the medicines you have been taking -- including headache tablets, allergy pills, medicines for stomach discomfort, laxatives, tranquilizers, cough medicines and pain killers. Think for a minute of what your medicine cabinet contains. List any unusual foods you ate in the two days before the hives first appeared. Have you had any recent illnesses?

Hives are usually controlled with antihistamine pills. These pills are taken every 6 hours until the hives are better. Antihistamine pills are very safe but may cause drowsiness. For this reason you may want to take the first dosage at dinner or bedtime. It is best to take the pills regularly until the hives stop rather than waiting until a new crop develops. Adjust the daily dosage (1-6 pills/day) based on the relief from the hives compared to the drowsiness.

Hives usually improve with medicines quickly. If you are not better within 5-7 days, please return to the office.

Medicines applied to your skin such as creams or lotions may help the itching. Apply these lotions whenever needed. Cooling the skin may also relieve severe itching. A cold shower is the simplest way.

When your hives have cleared up, keep taking the medicines in the same way for two more days. Once you have been free of hives for two days, *gradually* take less and less of your medicines over the next seven or eight days. If hives come back while you are tapering off the medicines, resume the original amount until the hives disappear.

While the hives usually clear quickly with treatment, they can be stubborn and I may have to try different medicines. Sometimes the amount of medicine needs to be increased. If your hives do not go away in a few days or if they last more than three weeks, call my office.