

Urticaria

Also known as hives

What is urticaria?

Urticaria is a skin condition commonly known as hives. It produces an itchy rash that tends to come and go and can last for a variable period of time. The condition can be acute (lasting less than 6 weeks) or chronic (lasting longer than 6 weeks). Most cases of urticaria have no known cause.

What causes urticaria?

Urticaria occurs when certain substances such as histamine are released from specific cells in the skin. This process is usually triggered by various immunologic mechanisms, most commonly involving the presence of circulating “IgE” antibodies, although other pathways may also be involved.

The cause of this “immunologic triggering” is unknown in the majority of cases, but can sometimes be associated with various types of infections, chronic immunologic diseases or allergy to foods or medications. The use of intravenous dyes during some radiological tests can sometimes trigger urticaria as well.

Physical urticaria is a type of urticaria that may be caused by exposure of the skin to cold, heat, pressure or rubbing.

What does urticaria look like?

Urticaria typically looks like a raised rash that may be a normal skin colour or pinkish or red in colour. The rash may occur anywhere on the body and often starts off as small round spots that quickly enlarge and spread.

The rash can be very itchy but it usually only lasts for a few hours before settling, and eventually resolving completely within 24 to 48 hours.

Which other problems may occur with urticaria?

A viral illness can occur before urticaria develops, especially in children.

Some chronic medical conditions such as systemic lupus erythematosus or rheumatoid arthritis may occur with chronic urticaria.

Swelling of deeper tissues in the lips and throat may occur in some cases of urticaria and is called angioedema.

How is urticaria diagnosed?

For acute urticaria no specific tests are required as the condition is often expected to resolve completely. Allergy testing may be required if a specific food trigger is suspected.

For chronic urticaria tests involving blood, urine and stool specimens may be required to identify any infection or underlying chronic immune disorder that may be causing the condition.

How is urticaria treated?

The specific triggers that have been identified (such as a food or medication) should be avoided.

Chronic urticaria is usually treated with antihistamine medication. Antihistamines are commonly available as over-the-counter medications. They can often be effective in stopping itch and preventing future outbreaks of urticaria. Medication usually needs to be continued for many weeks and long term treatment may be required in some cases to keep the condition under control.

In cases where antihistamines fail to control symptoms, stronger immunosuppressive medications may be needed.

Acute urticaria usually resolves completely within 6 weeks.

Chronic urticaria can last for many weeks or months and the long term success of any treatment may depend on the presence of any underlying associated diseases.