

Hives: What You Should Know

What are hives?

Hives are raised bumps caused by irritation in the upper layers of the skin. They can be pale or red in color and are very itchy. The bumps are often oval or round, but also can be other shapes. They are usually 1 to 2 cm in size (about the size of a quarter), but can be larger. They may combine with nearby hives as they grow to form larger hives. Hives sometimes occur with inflammation in deeper layers of the skin, which causes swelling and can be painful. The medical term for hives is urticaria (UR-tih-CAR-ee-uh).

Usually hives only affect the skin, but sometimes they can be part of a serious allergic reaction. When this happens, you may have other symptoms such as dizziness, stomach cramps, swelling, or trouble breathing. If you think you are having a serious allergic reaction, go to the emergency room.

How long do they last?

Hives show up quickly (within minutes) and fade within hours. Once faded, they leave no marks other than scratches from itching. However, new hives may show up after the original hives have gone away. For most people, the hives will come back for only a few days to a few weeks. In some people, hives may come back every day or every few days for months to years.

Who gets them?

People of all ages can get hives. About one in five people will have hives at some point in his or her lifetime, but only one in 100 people will have episodes that last more than six weeks.

What causes them?

Hives can be caused by many things, including:

- Colds
- Bladder infections or other types of infection
- Allergies to food, particles in the air, or things that touch your skin
- Insect stings or bites
- Medicines
- Heat, cold, or pressure
- Exercise
- A serious disease, but this is rare

In many cases, no specific cause is found.

How are they diagnosed?

Your doctor can diagnose hives by looking at the skin, asking questions, and doing a physical exam. Because the hives can fade by the time you see your doctor, it may help to take a picture of them. Blood tests usually are not needed unless the hives have been coming back regularly for more than six weeks. Other testing may be done if your doctor thinks a specific cause is likely.



Hives: What You Should Know *(continued)*

How are they treated?

The most important treatment is avoiding the things that cause your hives, if your doctor finds out what is causing them. Your doctor may have you take medicines called antihistamines, if needed. Many of these are available without a prescription. Sometimes your doctor may have you take more than the normal dose, but this should only be done under his or her supervision. Sometimes other prescription medicines also are used to treat hives.

Where can I get more information?

Your doctor

AAFP's Patient Education Resource

Web site: <http://familydoctor.org/737.xml> (for urticaria caused by exercise)

American Academy of Dermatology

Web site: http://www.aad.org/public/publications/pamphlets/skin_urticaria.html

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Notes:

This handout is provided to you by your family doctor and the American Academy of Family Physicians. Other health-related information is available from the AAFP online at <http://familydoctor.org>.

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