

# What are hives?

The medical term for hives is **urticaria**. Hives are itchy areas of swelling in the skin caused by a substance called **histamine**. Hives may be caused by many different things.

## WHAT DO HIVES LOOK LIKE?

Hives typically appear as pink or red puffy spots ("welts") on the skin. They can be different sizes, from very small to quite large. They are usually itchy. Hives can appear anywhere on the body. If you draw a circle around a single hive on the skin, it will usually have moved, changed shape, or disappeared completely within 24 hours, though new hives may have popped up in other locations. In young children, hives can look like big circles or rings on the skin. The rings may have normal skin in the middle, or look purplish like a bruise. Sometimes this purple patch will last longer than the hive itself.

It is common for young children with hives to also get swelling of the hands and feet. This can be uncomfortable, and may cause the child to avoid walking.

When hives occur after scratching or rubbing the skin, it is called **dermatographism**, which literally means "skin writing." These marks usually go away in less than an hour. Dermatographism is a normal finding that happens in over 5% of healthy people and may also become more noticeable during breakouts of hives.

## WHO GETS HIVES?

Children and adults of any age can get hives. Hives are very common. 15-20% of people will get hives at some point in their lives.

## WHAT CAUSES HIVES?

Hives are a skin reaction to many different causes. Infections are the most common cause of hives in young children. Often the child seems well and has no or very few other symptoms of an infection before the hives begin. Other common causes of hives include medicines and foods. Less common causes include additives to foods such as preservatives and color dyes, exercise, stress, sunlight, and contact with cold substances like ice. In most cases, hives occur in perfectly healthy people, but occasionally hives may be a sign of a more serious condition like an autoimmune disease. Often, a specific cause for hives cannot be found.

### WHEN SHOULD I BE WORRIED ABOUT HIVES?

Let a doctor know right away or go to the nearest emergency room if your child has swelling or tingling of the mouth, tongue or throat, trouble breathing, trouble swallowing, and/or vomiting with the hives. These are signs of anaphylaxis, which is an emergency.

## HOW LONG DO HIVES LAST?

In over 80% of children, outbreaks of hives will end within 2 weeks. Occasionally hives will continue to break out for longer. The term "chronic urticaria" is used when the breakouts continue for longer than 6 weeks.

## DIAGNOSIS AND TREATMENT

### HOW ARE HIVES DIAGNOSED?

Hives are usually diagnosed by a physical exam by a healthcare provider. In most cases, there are no good tests to figure out why a child has hives. If hives become "chronic," further testing may be recommended.

### TREATMENT FOR HIVES (URTICARIA)

- **Hives related to infections will go away on their own.** If there is another known cause for the hives, it should be avoided.
- **Antihistamines are the main treatment for hives.** Your healthcare provider may recommend over-the-counter cetirizine (Zyrtec), loratadine (Claritin) or fexofenadine (Allegra) during the daytime because they do not cause sleepiness. Over-the-counter diphenhydramine (Benadryl) or prescription hydroxyzine may be recommended at night. These medications work best when taken on a regular schedule each day so that hives are suppressed, rather than taking the medicine once the hives appear.
- **Your doctor may prescribe other treatments for hives** that don't respond to antihistamines.



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The Society for Pediatric Dermatology and Wiley Publishing cannot be held responsible for any errors or for any consequences arising from the use of the information contained in this handout. Handout originally published in *Pediatric Dermatology*; Vol. 35, No. 1 (2018).

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