

Hives

Hives (urticaria and angioedema) are a common and uncomfortable skin reaction. They are usually caused by viruses or allergies, but many other causes are possible. Hives usually improve with simple treatments. If hives last for several weeks, they may be a sign of another disease.

What are hives?

Hives are raised bumps or welts that appear on the skin or lips and mouth. They range in size from pinpoint to inches and are usually itchy. Hives are also called *urticaria*.

Hives are caused by the release in the skin of a substance called histamine—the same substance responsible for many allergic reactions. They are often caused by allergens, but many other causes are possible. *Angioedema* is larger areas of swelling—for example, of the lips or hands.

Hives usually appear suddenly. They may swell and join together, forming large, red, swollen areas. Because they appear and grow so quickly, hives can be frightening for you and your child. Although they may be a sign of a serious reaction, hives usually disappear within a few hours or days.

What do they look like?

- Hives first appear as small, raised bumps or welts. They may occur suddenly and can be very itchy.
- Hives can occur anywhere on the skin or all over the body.
- Hives may swell, forming large pink or red areas. The wheals may then join together to form even larger areas called angioedema.
- Hives and angioedema may change shape, disappear, and reappear unpredictably. These changes can occur in a matter of minutes or hours.
- Hives can appear anywhere on the body. The face, tongue, hands, feet, and genital area are most commonly affected.

What causes hives?

- There are many possible causes of hives. The most common are:
 - Allergic or other types of reactions. These may be caused by drugs, foods, pets, bee stings, or anything else your child is allergic to.

- Infection with a virus or bacteria.
- Sometimes hives are a sign of another disease. Or they may result from physical causes, such as exposure to cold, pressure, sunlight, or even water. However, these other causes are rare, especially in children.
- Often, no specific cause of hives is identified.

What are some possible complications of hives?

- Hives can be a warning sign of a serious allergic reaction.
- Rarely, hives do not go away on their own or with simple treatments. If hives last for several weeks, further tests may be performed to try to identify the cause.

Can hives be prevented?

- If your child is allergic—for example, to foods or pets—avoiding those allergens will help to reduce the risk of hives.
- In the rare cases in which hives result from physical causes—such as cold or sunlight—avoiding those causes will reduce the risk of hives.
- Otherwise, hives are a common but unpredictable problem.

How are hives treated?

For most common causes of hives in children, only simple treatments are needed. Even without treatment, the hives may go away on their own.

- The main medications used are antihistamines, such as Benadryl (generic name: diphenhydramine). To avoid the side effect of drowsiness, you may prefer to give your child one of the newer antihistamines, such as Claritin (generic name: loratadine) or Allegra (generic name: fexofenadine).
- If one of the less common causes of hives is found, we may recommend other medications.
- If hives are caused by allergies, you should try to prevent your child from being exposed to whatever he or she is allergic to.
- If your child's hives are part of a serious allergic reaction (difficulty breathing or *anaphylaxis*), emergency treatment is needed. 

 **When should I call your office?**

Call our office if:

- Your child develops hives that do not go away on their own or do not improve with simple treatments.
- Your child develops any of the symptoms of a serious allergic reaction (such as tingling or numbness around the mouth, coughing or wheezing, severe swelling, or tightness in the throat and chest). Call 911 or another emergency number. *This is an emergency!* 