

Urticaria (Hives/Nettle Rash)

Urticaria (also called hives or nettle rash) presents itself as welts on the skin, swelling of the lips and eyelids, and occasional swelling of the joints. The welts are typically red, raised spots that can vary in size from less than an inch across to the size of a dinner plate.

A breakout of urticaria can last just a few days or can last for months or years, occurring in brief but chronic episodes.

Causes:

Like a headache, hives are not a disease unto themselves but a symptom of a problem. Causes of hives can include:

- Drug allergy. Just about any medication can cause an allergy. Even if it has been taken for quite a while with no reaction, a drug can eventually cause a sensitization that leads to an allergic reaction.
- Food allergy. The most common foods that cause allergies are nuts, dairy products, shellfish, fruit, pork, chocolate, cola drinks, spices and seasonings, coffee, tea and alcohol.
- Airborne particles. These include pollens, mold and mildew, dust, or aerosol sprays.
- Infections, infestations, bites or stings. Examples are conditions caused by a virus, bacterial infection, fungus or intestinal parasite.
- Psychological factors. Fatigue and stress have been known to bring on an outbreak of hives.
- Other diseases. Hives may be associated with liver disease, thyroid problems, chronic sinusitis or cystitis.
- Physical allergies. Some people will break out if they become chilled or hot or upon exertion.
- Other substances. Hives may be caused by contact with particular fabrics, soaps, cosmetics, etc.

Treatment:

Most hives will clear up if the cause can be controlled or removed. A primary element of treatment is trying to determine exactly what is bringing on outbreaks.

Your Family Dermatology doctor may recommend that you stop eating foods that are common allergens. You will be able to add these foods back to your diet later, one at a time, to see if they cause a reaction.

You also may be prescribed an antihistamine or another medication. Be sure to take any prescription medication exactly as directed. Do not stop taking the medicine early just because your hives clear up.

For additional relief, you can try bathing in lukewarm water. During an outbreak, try to wear loose-fitting clothes and avoid restrictive straps or belts which can add to discomfort.