

Hives (Urticaria)

Hives are a very itchy rash caused by an allergic reaction. Hives look like raised pink spots with pale centres on the skin. The spots range from 1cm to several centimetres wide (hives often look like mosquito bites). The spots may be different shapes. The spots rapidly and repeatedly change in location, size, and shape. Large swellings are common around the eyes, lips, and genitals if hives occur there.

What is the cause?

Most often the cause is not found.

- Widespread hives can be an allergic reaction to a food, medicine, viral infection, insect bite, or many other possible substances.
- Hives on just one part of the body (localized) are usually due to skin contact with plants, pollen, food, or pet saliva. Localized hives are not caused by drugs, infections, or swallowed foods.

Slowly developing hives (over hours to days) are unlikely to result in a severe allergic reaction (anaphylaxis). Although they look dramatic they are not dangerous.

Hives are not contagious. Tests are rarely needed to find the cause as hives get better by themselves in most cases and don't happen again.

How long do they last?

More than 10% of children get hives. Most children who develop hives have them only once. The hives come and go for 3 or 4 days and then mysteriously disappear.

Some young children become sensitized to mosquito or flea bites. They develop big hives (called papular urticaria) at the sites of old and new bites. These hives may last for months.

Very rarely the hives can come and go for many months. These children are usually referred to an allergy specialist who will organise further investigations and treatment.

How can I take care of my child?

Itching Give a cool bath to relieve itching. Rub very itchy areas with a

cold face washer or ice cube for 10 minutes.

Antihistamine medicine The best drug for hives is an antihistamine. An antihistamine won't cure the hives, but it will reduce their number and relieve itching. Non-sedating antihistamines are suitable for children over 6 months of age. Telfast (Fexofenadine) is used for babies 6-12 months. Claratyne (loratadine) and Zyrtec (cetirizine) are the most commonly used antihistamine drugs for children 12 months and older. These medications are available without a prescription. You should never combine or use more than one antihistamine at a time.

Your child's medication is:

_____.

Give _____mg (_____ mL/tabs)

every _____ hours for _____ days or until the rash has gone.

Avoidance and showers Avoid anything you think might have caused the hives. For hives triggered by pollen or animal contact, take a cool shower or bath. For localized hives, wash the allergic substance of the skin with soap and water. Localized hives usually disappear in a few hours and don't need antihistamines.

Common mistakes in the treatment of hives Many parents wait to give the antihistamine until new hives have appeared. This means your child will become itchy again. The purpose of the medicine is to keep your child comfortable until the hives go away. Therefore, give the medicine regularly until you are sure the hives are



completely gone. Hives are not contagious and your child can be with other children.

Extra medications In some children, a single antihistamine may actually worsen the hives. Your doctor may recommend adding a slightly different acting antihistamine such as Zantac (ranitidine) to act together with the first. For severe cases that have persisted for more than 3-4 weeks, your doctor may prescribe a steroid medication such as prednisolone, but this should never be started without seeing your doctor first.

When should I see a doctor?

Urgently if:

- Breathing or swallowing becomes difficult.
- Your child seems very sick.

During office hours if:

- Most of the itch is not relieved after your child has been taking an antihistamine for 24 hours.
- The hives last more than 1 week.
- You have other concerns or questions.

For more information

Paediatric Emergency Department

Women's and Children's Hospital
72 King William Road
North Adelaide SA 5006
Tel 08 8161 7044
Fax 08 8161 6750
<http://www.wch.sa.gov.au>

Reviewed September 2019

© Department of Health, Government of South Australia. All rights reserved.



Government
of South Australia

SA Health



Women's
& Children's
Hospital