

Hives

(URTICARIA)

What Is It?

The condition known as *hives* appears as welts on the skin — raised, reddened areas. Most times, though, welts are very itchy. Hives are usually a short-term problem, lasting from a few hours to a few days (called “acute” hives). Sometimes, though, they last for several weeks; if they last more than six weeks, they are called “chronic.”

The welts result from fluid leakage from the blood vessels in and just underneath the skin. A substance called “histamine,” normally found inside most cells in the body and attached to protein in the blood, causes the vessels to swell and leak. This leakage causes the welts you see on your skin. Sometimes, the histamine goes deeper into the tissues, causing more extensive swelling (angioedema) of the face, feet and hands.

What Causes It?

The bad news is — many times it is *impossible* to find the cause. The good news is — hives usually go away very quickly, and your doctor can almost always control them with medication. There are many things which can cause histamine to be released. Contact with allergens, certain drugs, viruses or other diseases, cold, heat, and vibrations all have been known to cause hives. Allergies are not the most common cause of hives, but when allergies *are* the cause, foods may be to blame. Your allergist can test you to see if your hives are due to allergies. When drugs are the cause, it is often drugs that you do not suspect. Be sure to tell your doctor about all the drugs you have taken, including “over-

the-counter” medications. Aspirin is a common cause of hives, and many people do not know that it is found in such things as Contact and Alka-Seltzer.

Who Gets It?

Almost anyone can get hives. Studies show that between 15 and 20 percent of the population have them at some time.

What Usually Happens?

If left alone, hives will go away on their own most of the time. Often, all that is needed is time, a little patience, and some medication to control the itching.

What Problems May Occur?

Hives are usually not a serious medical problem. In almost all the people who have them, they pose no serious health problem.

What Makes It Worse?

Continued contact with the cause will make them worse. Some possible causes are: foods, drugs, infections, sunlight, exercise, chemicals, pollens, and pets. Sadly, it is often very, very hard to find the cause!

What Happens When It Is Treated?

If the cause can be found, hives can be prevented from recurring by avoiding the cause. In the meantime, the itching can usually be controlled by taking anti-histamines. Sometimes, drugs called steroids must be used. Steroids are the least satisfactory drug for long-term control of hives due to the potential for side effects. Your doctor can advise you about the use of steroids.