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## SELF-CARE INFORMATION ON URTICARIA (HIVES)

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Urticaria – also known as hives, weals, welts, or nettle rash – is a raised, itchy rash that appears on the skin. It may appear on one part of the body or be spread across large areas.

The rash is usually very itchy and ranges in size from a few millimetres to the size of a hand. Although the affected area may change in appearance within 24 hours, the rash usually settles within a few days.

### Types of urticaria

Doctors may refer to urticaria as either:

- acute urticaria – if the rash clears completely within 6 weeks
- chronic urticaria – in rarer cases, where the rash persists or comes and goes for more than 6 weeks, often over many years

A much rarer type of urticaria, known as urticaria vasculitis, can cause blood vessels inside the skin to become inflamed. In these cases, the weals last longer than 24 hours, are more painful, and can leave a bruise.

### Speak to your GP if:

Your symptoms:

- Don't go away within 48 hours
- Are severe
- Cause distress
- Disrupt daily activities
- Occur alongside other symptoms

### Who is affected by urticaria?

Acute urticaria (also known as short-term urticaria) is a common condition, estimated to affect around 1-in-5 people at some point in their lives.

Children are often affected by the condition, as well as women aged 30 to 60, and people with a history of allergies.

## What causes urticaria?

Urticaria occurs when a trigger causes high levels of histamine and other chemicals to be released in the skin. These substances cause the blood vessels in the affected area of skin to open and become leaky. This extra fluid in the tissues causes reddening and itchiness.

Histamine is released for many reasons, including:

- An allergic reaction – like a food allergy or a reaction to an insect bite or sting
- Cold or heat exposure
- Infection – such as a cold
- Certain medications – like non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs or antibiotics

However, in many cases of urticaria, no obvious cause can be found.

Some cases of long-term urticaria may be caused by the immune system mistakenly attacking healthy tissue. However, this is difficult to diagnose, and the treatment options are the same.

Certain triggers may also make the symptoms worse. These include:

- Drinking alcohol
- Drinking caffeine
- Emotional stress
- Warm temperature

## Diagnosing urticaria

Diagnosis of urticaria is usually made by examining the rash. You may also be asked questions to find out what triggered your symptoms.

If your GP thinks that it's caused by an allergic reaction, you may be referred to an allergy clinic for an allergy test. However, if you've had urticaria most days for more than 6 weeks, it's unlikely to be the result of an allergy.

You may also be referred for several tests, including a full blood count, to find out whether there's an underlying cause of your symptoms.

## Treating urticaria

In many cases, treatment isn't needed for urticaria, because the rash often gets better within a few days.

If the itchiness is causing you discomfort, antihistamines can help. Antihistamines are available over the counter at pharmacies – speak to your pharmacist for advice.

A short course of steroid tablets (oral corticosteroids) may occasionally be needed for more severe cases of urticaria.

If you have persistent urticaria, you may be referred to a skin specialist (dermatologist). Treatment usually involves medication to relieve the symptoms, while identifying and avoiding potential triggers.

## Complications of urticaria

Around a quarter of people with acute urticaria and half of people with chronic urticaria also develop angioedema (see below)

Chronic urticaria can also be upsetting and negatively impact a person's mood and quality of life.

## Angioedema

Angioedema is swelling in the deeper layers of a person's skin. It's often severe and is caused by a build-up of fluid. The symptoms of angioedema can affect any part of the body, but usually affect the:

- Eyes
- Lips
- Genitals
- Hands
- Feet

Medication such as antihistamines and short courses of steroids tablets can be used to relieve the swelling.

## Emotional impact

Living with any long-term condition can be difficult. Chronic urticaria can have a considerable negative impact on a person's mood and quality of life. Living with itchy skin can be particularly upsetting.

One study found that chronic urticaria can have the same negative impact as heart disease. It also found that 1 in 7 people with chronic urticaria had some sort of psychological or emotional problem, such as stress, anxiety, and depression

See your GP if your urticaria is getting you down. Effective treatments are available to improve your symptoms.

Talking to friends and family can also improve feelings of isolation and help you cope better with your condition.

## Anaphylaxis

Urticaria can be one of the first symptoms of a severe allergic reaction known as anaphylaxis. Anaphylaxis should always be treated as a medical emergency.

## Phone 999 if:

You or someone else has urticaria (hives) and is experiencing symptoms of anaphylaxis like:

- Swollen eyes, lips, hands, and feet
- Feeling lightheaded or faint
- Narrowing of the airways, which can cause wheezing and breathing difficulties
- Abdominal pain, nausea, and vomiting
- Collapsing and becoming unconscious

## ***Useful contacts***

- Ask your pharmacist
- Patient UK - [www.patient.co.uk](http://www.patient.co.uk)
- NHS Choices, [www.nhs.uk/conditions/](http://www.nhs.uk/conditions/)

### ***If you have further questions:***

Call the ***practice*** on *01285 653184 or 01285 653122*

If you require ***urgent*** medical advice, call *111 (24 Hrs)*

In an ***emergency*** call ***999***