

Acute (Sudden Onset) Urticaria

Urticaria (sometimes called hives) is one cause of an itchy rash. Urticaria can be acute (sudden onset and lasting a short time) or chronic (ongoing). This leaflet deals only with acute urticaria where the rash comes and goes quickly, usually within 24-48 hours. Acute urticaria is common. About 1 in 5 people will have at least one bout of urticaria in their life. It can affect anyone at any age.

What does the rash of urticaria look like?

The rash usually appears suddenly. It consists of small pale areas of skin (weals) with each weal surrounded by redness (flares). The 'weal and flare' rash of urticaria looks similar the rash of a nettle sting. The pale, whitish weals look like mild blisters. The weals are commonly 1-2 cm across but can vary in size. There may be just a few but sometimes there can be many over various parts of the body. Sometimes weals next to each other join together to form larger ones. The weals can be any shape but are often circular. As a weal fades, the surrounding flare remains for a while causing the affected area of skin to look blotchy and red. This then fades gradually and the skin returns to normal.

Sometimes the weals appear at various areas on the body in differing sizes. (This is typical if the cause is an allergy - see below.) Each weal and flare lasts less than 24 hours but as some fade away, others may appear. It can then seem as if the rash is moving around the body. The weals are usually itchy. The rash may appear quite dramatic if many areas of skin are affected.

What causes acute urticaria?

A 'trigger' is thought to cause the release of chemicals (such as histamine) from cells under the skin surface. These chemicals cause inflammation and fluid to pool under the skin (causing weals) and the blood vessels to open wide or 'dilate' (causing flares). The trigger is not known or identified in about half of cases. Some known triggers include the following.

- *Food allergy* is sometimes the cause. Many foods can be a trigger. Examples include allergy to nuts, strawberries, citrus fruit, egg, food additives, spices, tea, chocolate and shellfish. Sometimes a food allergy can develop even if you have eaten the food many times before.
- *Viral infections* such as colds and 'flu cause an urticarial rash in some people. A mild viral infection causing few (if any) other symptoms may be a common trigger of an urticarial rash that comes and goes without an apparent cause.
- *Medication* can sometimes cause an allergy including an urticarial rash. Allergies to penicillin, aspirin and anti-inflammatory medication are the best known but other tablets

and medicines cause a rash in some people.

- *Physical causes* - skin contact with 'sensitizers' causes a local area of urticaria in some people. For example, chemicals, cosmetics, plants, ointments, insect bites, nettle stings or pressure on the skin. Water is a sensitizer in a small number of people. Heat, cold, emotion, exercise or strong sunlight can cause an urticarial rash in some people.

Is acute urticaria serious?

Usually not. The rash is itchy but normally fades within a day or so and causes no harm. Most people with acute urticaria do not feel too unwell unless they have a cold or 'flu virus that is triggering the rash. The cause of the rash is not known in more than half of cases and it is commonly a 'one-off' event. However, urticaria may be more serious in the following situations.

- *Food allergy* - if a food allergy is the cause then the rash is likely to return each time the particular food is eaten. This is more often a 'nuisance' than serious.
- *Serious allergy* - sometimes urticaria is part of a serious allergy reaction, which can cause other symptoms such as breathing problems. This is uncommon. For example, peanut allergy can cause serious symptoms in addition to a rash.
- *Ongoing (chronic) urticaria* - sometimes the rash comes and goes for days or weeks. Urticaria is classed as 'acute' if it lasts for less than 6 weeks. Chronic urticaria means the rash keeps coming and going on most days for 6 weeks or longer. This is uncommon. No cause or trigger is identified in most people with chronic urticaria. However, tests may be advised if the rash lasts longer than 6 weeks as a cause may be found in some people.

Consult a doctor if the rash does not go or if other symptoms occur, particularly breathing problems.

What is the treatment for acute urticaria?

- Often no treatment is necessary as the rash commonly goes within 24-48 hours.
- A cool bath or shower may ease the itch.
- Antihistamine medication can help to relieve itch. These are available on prescription but also without a prescription at pharmacies. There are several brands and the pharmacist will advise. The release of histamine under the skin is involved in causing the rash of urticaria. Antihistamines block the action of the histamine.
- If a 'trigger' were identified, such as a food, then it would be sensible to avoid it in the future.