HIVES (Urticaria)

**WHAT ARE HIVES?**
Hives are raised, red, itchy areas on the skin (also called “wheals” or “welts”) due to an allergic skin reaction. The medical term for hives is “urticaria”.

**WHAT CAUSES HIVES?**
Hives are the result of an allergic reaction to any number of irritants. Your body reacts to the irritant by releasing a chemical called histamine. Histamine causes the redness, swelling, and itching associated with hives.

Irritants or triggers may include:
- Foods (especially eggs, shellfish, milk, nuts, berries, dyes, or other additives)
- Medicines (such as aspirin, penicillin, or sulfa drugs)
- Common allergens (like pollen, animal fur, insect bites/stings, latex, etc.)
- New soaps, detergents, lotions, make-up, etc.
- Exposure to heat, cold, sun, or water
- Pressure on the skin, emotional stress, or exercise
- Medical conditions (such as infections, blood transfusions, cancer, lupus, etc.)

Most of the time, however, no specific cause for hives can be identified.

**WHAT ARE THE SYMPTOMS?**
Hives usually appear as raised, red, itchy areas that can vary in size and shape. They are usually painless and can appear on any part of the body. Common sites include the arms, legs, and trunk. Symptoms can last anywhere from a few minutes to several days and may recur.

Angioedema is a more severe reaction, such as to a bee sting, that results in swelling of deeper layers of the skin. Swelling often appears around the eyes, lips, and/or cheeks. Angioedema can be life-threatening if your throat or tongue swell so much that your airway becomes blocked and causes problems with breathing.

**HOW IS IT DIAGNOSED?**
Your health care provider will look at the rash and take a detailed medical history about possible exposures. To help identify the specific cause, your health care provider may ask that you:
- Keep a diary of everything you eat, drink, take, and are exposed to for 2-4 weeks.
- Avoid foods that you think you are allergic to - one at a time.
- See an allergist for skin tests and/or blood tests.

**HOW IS IT TREATED?**
Treatment depends on the severity of symptoms. If symptoms are mild, hives can resolve without any specific treatment. A variety of measures can be taken to decrease itching, swelling, and discomfort. Once symptoms are controlled, it is important to avoid any known triggers.

- **Self-Care Measures**
  - Soak in a lukewarm bath, or use cool compresses on the rash.
  - Avoid heat or rubbing, which can release more histamines and worsen symptoms.
  - Wear loose cotton clothing. Avoid rough, tight, or scratchy material.
Medications
- Oral antihistamines are the mainstay of treatment. They are used to decrease the allergic response and itching.
  - Many patients take a non-sedating antihistamine (such as Zyrtec, Claritin, or Allegra) in the morning to control daytime symptoms and a sedating antihistamine (such as Benadryl) at bedtime to control itching.
  - Another type of antihistamine commonly used to treat heartburn (such as Zantac) may also be prescribed to decrease symptoms.
- Corticosteroid creams are frequently used to reduce inflammation and itching. Only a thin layer of the medication is needed to be effective. Excessive or long-term use can cause thinning and whitening of the skin. Higher-dose creams should not be used on the face or neck unless specifically directed by your health care provider.
- Oral corticosteroids (like prednisone) may be prescribed if the rash is severe or if it is not responding to other treatments.

WHAT IF I HAVE A SERIOUS ALLERGIC REACTION?
Some allergic reactions can be life-threatening and require immediate medical attention.
- If you have an allergic reaction that affects your breathing, causes throat tightness, or causes swelling around the eyes and lips, call your health care provider or 911 immediately!
- You may be treated with several medications, including an injection of epinephrine. Once the emergency symptoms have been treated and remain under control, you will be prescribed medication to take for the next several days to prevent the reaction from recurring.

If you have a known severe allergy, such as to bee stings or peanuts, you will be prescribed an EpiPen to carry on your person. The EpiPen is a single-dose injection of epinephrine that you can give yourself to counteract a severe allergic reaction until medical help arrives.

HOW LONG WILL THE EFFECTS OF HIVES LAST?
Hives can last from a few hours to several months. In most cases, hives will resolve without treatment, but taking antihistamines or using corticosteroids will help the hives go away faster. They will also prevent new hives from appearing.

Chronic urticaria refers to hives that are present most days of the week for more than 6 weeks.
- Most of the time, it is not possible to determine the cause.
- Symptoms can go away spontaneously after weeks to months but may continue to recur. However, almost half of patients undergo remission within one year.
- Antihistamines taken regularly are helpful and can prevent recurrences; they are continued for at least 1-3 months after symptoms have been controlled.
- Unlike acute hives, chronic hives rarely cause life-threatening symptoms.