

Inflammatory conditions



Urticaria (Hives)

Important Points

- The majority of cases of hives have no obvious cause
- The most common trigger is thought to be viral
- Hives may be caused by an allergy to some foods
- Avoid heat during an attack and try to cool the skin as much as possible
- Antihistamine syrups prescribed by a doctor will control most severe attacks of hives if they are given quickly
- Lotions and creams on the skin make little difference

What are they?

Hives (urticaria) are very common in children. They appear as very itchy red weals (lumps) that develop within minutes, last an hour or so, and then clear completely leaving normal skin again. On occasion in children hives may even have a bruise-like appearance. Once a child has developed hives, heat will make them worse or itchier.

Where do they occur?

They can occur anywhere on the body including the face, trunk and limbs. Most attacks last only a few days during which time the spots come and go. Occasionally, hives can keep appearing on and off for months.

What causes them?

In the majority of cases of hives there is not an obvious cause. It is thought that viral illnesses may be the most common trigger in children although the children are often otherwise well. In such cases the hives tend to settle in less than one week although they may reappear with other illnesses. Bacterial infections can also trigger hives and may require antibiotics. Hives can also be caused by an allergy to something that has been eaten, such as strawberries or seafood. Occasionally medicine, such as penicillin, can cause hives.

How are they treated?

The itchy red weals in the skin are due to release of histamine, which is a response in the skin due to an allergic reaction. Therefore, the treatment is

with antihistamine syrups, usually prescribed by a doctor. They will generally control most attacks of hives. Heat should be avoided during an attack of hives as it makes it worse. Cooling down the child with a fan or a cold wet cloth on the itchy areas will reduce the itch and may shorten the attack. Lotions and creams on the skin make little, if any, difference.

Most attacks of hives related to food occur within 12 hours of eating it. Try to identify which particular food your child has eaten within 12 hours before each attack of hives. You may be able to work out which food caused the condition and avoid them eating it in the future.

Further Information

Your family doctor.

Your Maternal and Child Health nurse.

Your pharmacist.

A dermatologist or allergist for persistent hives.

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