

## For The Parents of Patients With Hives

Hives are a very common disorder. At least 20% of the population, including children, will develop some form of hive-like eruption in the course of a lifetime.

Contrary to popular opinion, hives is *not* a disease. Caused by the release of a chemical called histamine, hives – physicians call it urticaria – is a symptom of some disorder or allergic mechanism going on in the body. Hives appear on the skin and mucous membranes in the form of itching, stinging, and burning wheals (welts) surrounded by a zone of redness. Hives come in a variety of sizes and shapes, and can appear just about anywhere on your body.

When the wheals are very large and the loose tissue of the eyelids and lips swell to form actual disfigurement, the condition is called angioedema, or “bull hives.” Hives may involve the mucous membranes of the mouth and throat, and in rare cases may even obstruct breathing so severely that heroic medical methods are required to prevent suffocation.

Like coughing or sneezing, which may signal a response to an upper respiratory infection or hay fever, hives are a clue which alerts us to abnormal goings-on in our system. For example, hives may be a response to an infection, an allergic reaction to some strange food or drug, or the result of emotional tension.

It is extremely difficult to pinpoint the specific cause of a case of hives, mainly because the possibilities are endless. In the acute type of hives – where the itching and wheals appear quickly and fade in a few minutes or hours – it is somewhat easier to uncover the culprit: a strange food, and emotional upset, a penicillin injection, a new medication, or some recent infection such as chicken pox, mononucleosis, or an upper respiratory ailment. Unfortunately, in the chronic form, the culprit is much more difficult to determine.

The most common causes of hives are certain foods, viruses and drugs. Strawberries, nuts, chocolate, fish and shellfish, milk, eggs, pork, oranges, bananas, and many other edibles can cause hives. Some people get hives from inhaling substances such as animal dander (from cats, dogs, or horses), house dust, pollen, molds, certain plants and flour in bakeries. Others break out in hives when touch something cold or when they touch something hot, and still others when they are exposed to sunlight. Some even get hives when pressure is applied to their skin, as in the shower. There are certain types of hives that are of psychogenic origin. Fear, anger, and stress are the primary psychological factors responsible.

The treatment of hives consists of identifying and elimination the cause of the condition. You, as a parent, must be the detective. What food did your child eat? What medication did he or she take? Anything new? Anything different? Has you child been in some strange place? What different inhalants or sprays has he or she been exposed to lately?

See your doctor if you child’s hives are persistent, recurring or severe. It is important that you provide as much information as you can to your pediatrician. Only a physician can unearth the origin and nature of hives, and only a physician can eradicate them. Your child may need a through physical examination, blood tests, x-rays, allergy testing, and other laboratory analyses to rule out any internal infection such as hepatitis.

For acute, temporary hives, over-the-counter antihistamines taken orally usually relieve the symptoms promptly – at least until the next exposure to the culprit. If these don’t work, prescription medications maybe needed, your physician will know what to prescribe.

Finding the cause of chronic, recurrent hives is often a difficult, frustrating, and lengthy process, and requires patience and extensive detective work. Only when you are able to discover the cause can you prevent hives from recurring.