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HIVES (Urticaria)

Urticaria, more commonly known as hives, is an allergic reaction that causes raised, red or skin colored welts on the surface of the skin with clearly defined borders. These lesions usually itch, but they can also burn or sting. Hives can occur anywhere on the body and vary in shape and size from pea-sized to several inches across. They can also join to cover a broader area. Hives can disappear and reappear in the same or different location (fleeting urticaria) within minutes or hours but usually start suddenly and resolve quickly.

Hives are caused when your body responds to an allergen being introduced to your system. Histamines and other substances are released into the body causing fluid to leak from the small blood vessels under the skin. When this fluid collects under the skin, it forms the blotches called hives, and itching and swelling occur. Hives are often a result of an allergic reaction to food such as shellfish, fish, nuts, eggs, and berries or medicines, pollen, animal dander, and insect bites. Although these are common allergens, 95% of the time there is no identifiable cause (“idiopathic hives”). Other less common causes of hives are viral infections, stress, extreme temperature exposure, or exercise.

Hives are very common, especially in people with other allergies like hay fever, with 10-20% of the population experiencing at least one episode in their lifetime. They are usually harmless, but hives appearing around the face or hives that are accompanied by shortness of breath, wheezing, or trouble breathing should be reported to your child’s physician.

Treatment of hives is focused on relieving the symptoms. You may apply cool compresses to the area or soak in a cool bath, but anything that makes your child hot (hot showers or baths, running around, being overdressed or sun exposure) should be avoided. Simple over-the-counter antihistamines (ie: Benadryl, Claritin) may be administered to relieve the itching. Your child’s physician may prescribe a steroid medication in severe cases.