Urticaria

Urticaria, also known as hives, is an itchy blotchy rash that looks like a nettle sting.

Some people also get swelling of their skin, lips and around the eyes. This is called angioedema.

Urticaria is very common and is sometimes caused by allergies to dust, pollen and pets or foods like eggs, milk, fish and nuts. If it is caused by one of these, the rash would appear soon after contact with the allergen.

Not all hives are caused by allergies.

Many people are troubled by urticaria without any obvious cause.

The sudden appearance of an urticarial rash for several days is often due to a viral infection.

If the rash continues for more than six weeks the condition is known as chronic urticaria.

Chronic urticaria

Chronic urticaria is a common condition. It can sometimes be a problem and get in the way of daily activities.

Some people find that their rash can be caused by
- Heat - bathing in hot water
- Cold - weather and water
- Pressure - after sitting for a long time
- Emotion - this is known as cholinergic urticaria.

Recent studies have shown that in many people the rash can be caused by an autoimmune disease (a problem with the body’s immune system).

How the immune system causes hives

In an allergic reaction
An allergen (such as pollen) tells the mast cell (MC) to release chemicals which cause hives and an allergic reaction. An allergy antibody makes this happen

In chronic urticaria
The allergy antibody receptor is short circuited without any allergen or allergy antibody around. The MC then releases chemicals that cause hives
Treatment for chronic urticaria
There is no cure. Many children have the rashes for six months to a year.

The doctor may take some blood tests to look for conditions that can make urticaria worse.

The rash can be controlled by taking antihistamine medicines every day.

Antihistamines do not have long-term side effects and are not addictive. Even if you take them for a long time your child will not become immune (no longer have an affect). Sometimes a high dose of these medicines is needed to control the symptoms.

Long-term
Chronic urticaria is a long-term condition. Most people have symptoms for about six months but they can continue for one or two years. About half of suffers will have other episodes in the future.

Clinic appointments
We often ask food allergy patients to stop taking their antihistamines before coming to clinic. If your child has chronic urticaria and is taking antihistamines every day this advice does not apply to your child. Do not stop the antihistamines before the clinic appointment. Contact us if you are unsure.

More information can be found from the outpatient department 023 8079 4075
Email: childrensallergy@uhs.nhs.uk
Website: www.uhs.nhs.uk/childrensallergy

If you have any questions or concerns please contact
The children’s allergy team at Southampton General Hospital
Outpatient appointments: 023 8079 4075
Team administrator: 023 8079 4335
Day ward: 023 8079 4511

If you need a translation of this document, an interpreter or a version in large print, Braille or on audio tape, please telephone 023 8079 4688 for help.