

What are hives? — Hives are raised, red patches of skin that are usually very itchy (picture 1). They can happen because of an allergy or other causes. In most cases, hives come and go within a few hours. But they can show up again and again in some people.

Some people who get hives also get a condition called "angioedema." Angioedema is puffiness or swelling. It usually happens in the face, eyelids, ears, mouth, hands, feet, or genitals.

Some people who get hives or angioedema are having a dangerous allergic reaction. See a doctor or nurse right away if you suddenly get hives or get puffy and also have any of these symptoms:

- Trouble breathing
- Tightness in the throat
- Nausea and vomiting
- Cramps or stomach pain
- Passing out

Why did I get hives? — If you just got hives for the first time, you might have a new allergy to something. People can get hives because of allergies to:

- Medicines, such as antibiotics or aspirin
- Foods, such as eggs, nuts, fish, or shellfish
- Something they touched, such as a plant, animal saliva, or latex
- Insect stings

If your hives are caused by an allergy, you will need to avoid whatever you are allergic to.

Hives can also be caused by:

- Infections
- Having cold air or water on the skin
- Having something press or vibrate against the skin
- Changes in body temperature (such as when you cool down after a hot shower or a work out)

If you have had hives on most days for more than 6 weeks, you probably do not have an allergy. Hives that last this long are called "chronic hives." In most cases, doctors do not know what causes chronic hives.

If you have chronic hives, you will probably need to take medicines every day to control them. Luckily, chronic hives do usually go away with time.

How are hives treated? — You might not need treatment. Hives usually go away in a few days or weeks, even if you do not get treated. But if you do need treatment, the first step is to figure out if anything triggered the hives. If so, you will need to avoid that trigger.

To relieve itching, you can take medicines called antihistamines. These are the same medicines people usually take for allergies.

If you have severe hives or your hives will not go away, your doctor or nurse might suggest that you take medicines called steroids for a short time. Steroids work well but you should not take them for long, because they can cause serious side effects. These steroids are not the same ones that athletes take to build up muscle. These steroids relieve itching and reduce swelling.