

## Patient Information Leaflet: Urticaria (Hives)

### What is Urticaria?

Urticaria, commonly known as hives, is a skin condition characterised by raised, itchy red marks or bumps (weals) on the skin. These weals can vary in size and can appear anywhere on the body and may appear as lines after scratching. They can appear suddenly and typically disappear within 24 hours. Urticaria occurs when the body releases histamine and other chemicals in response to certain triggers, leading to localised swelling and redness.

### Types of Urticaria:

1. **Acute Urticaria:** Lasts less than six weeks and is often triggered by allergens (such as certain foods, medications, or insect stings) or infections.
2. **Chronic Urticaria:** Lasts for six weeks or longer and may have no identifiable trigger. This type may require more extensive investigation and management.
3. **Physical Urticaria:** Triggered by physical stimuli such as pressure, temperature, sunlight, or exercise.

### Causes and Triggers:

Common triggers for acute urticaria may include:

- **Foods:** Such as nuts, shellfish, eggs, and dairy.
- **Medications:** Including antibiotics, aspirin, or non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs).
- **Infections:** Viral or bacterial infections can induce hives, particularly in children.
- **Allergens:** Environmental factors such as bee and wasp stings, or insect bites.
- **Physical Stimuli:** Such as pressure on the skin, changes in temperature, sweating, or sunlight exposure.
- **Idiopathic:** In chronic urticaria it is unlikely that a cause will be found and the symptoms or urticaria are due to increased release of histamine and sensitivity to it.

### Symptoms:

Symptoms of urticaria include:

- Raised, itchy weals on the skin that may vary in size and shape.
- Weals that can appear and disappear rapidly, often changing locations.
- Some individuals may experience swelling (angioedema) in areas like the face, lips, or throat.

### Diagnosis:

Diagnosing urticaria typically involves:

- **Medical History:** Your dermatologist will ask about your symptoms, duration, and potential triggers.
- **Physical Examination:** An assessment of the skin to visualise the weals and any accompanying symptoms. This may include a pressure test or test for physical triggers.
- **Allergy Tests:** In some cases, allergy tests or blood tests may be conducted to identify specific allergens or underlying conditions contributing to urticaria.



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## Management and Treatment Options:

The treatment of urticaria focuses on relieving symptoms and preventing future outbreaks. Options may include:

1. **Antihistamines:**
  - Over-the-counter or prescription antihistamines (such as cetirizine and loratadine) can help alleviate itching and reduce the weals.
2. **Corticosteroids:**
  - Short courses of oral corticosteroids may be prescribed for moderate to severe cases of chronic urticaria to reduce inflammation.
3. **Leukotriene Receptor Antagonists:**
  - Medications like montelukast may be used in some cases for additional symptom management.
4. **Avoiding Triggers:**
  - Identifying and avoiding known triggers can be paramount in managing urticaria. Keeping a journal to track symptoms and potential triggers may help.
5. **Omalizumab:**
  - A monoclonal antibody treatment that may be considered for chronic urticaria that does not respond to standard treatments. This is an injection based treatment given monthly for severe cases.

## Self-Care and Lifestyle Tips:

- **Cool Compresses:** Applying cool compresses to the affected areas can soothe itching and reduce swelling.
- **Wear Loose Clothing:** Avoid tight clothing that may irritate the skin and exacerbate symptoms.
- **Moisturisers:** Use gentle, fragrance-free moisturizers to keep the skin hydrated.
- **Stress Management:** Stress can sometimes trigger or worsen urticaria, so relaxation techniques can be beneficial.

## When to Seek Medical Advice:

- If you experience severe symptoms, such as difficulty breathing or swelling of the face and throat, seek immediate medical attention (anaphylaxis).
- If urticaria persists for more than a few weeks or if you experience recurrent episodes without known triggers.
- If you notice any accompanying symptoms, such as fever or rash, to rule out underlying conditions.

## Conclusion:

Urticaria is a common condition that can be bothersome but is typically manageable with lifestyle adjustments and appropriate treatment. Understanding potential triggers and how to respond to outbreaks can help you gain better control over your symptoms.

If you have any questions or concerns about urticaria or its management, please consult your healthcare provider for further evaluation and personalized treatment options.

