

# Patient Instructions for After-Visit Summary: Chronic Urticaria and Angioedema

## **What are hives?**

Hives (urticaria) are raised, red, itchy patches of skin called wheals or welts. They usually have red borders and pale centers. Hives range in size from ¼ inch to 3 inches across or more. They may seem to move from place to place on the skin. Several hives may join to form a large area of raised, reddened skin.

Hives may occur with swelling under the skin (angioedema), though swelling also may occur without hives. Swelling may hurt a bit, but it does not usually itch like hives. It can be dangerous if severe swelling affects your throat, but this is very rare.

Hives are not contagious and cannot be spread to other people.

In people who have ongoing problems with hives and swelling, the cause is often not known. Some possible causes include:

- An autoimmune disorder. This is a problem with the body's natural defense system.
- Medicines, including over-the-counter drugs, vitamins, and herbal products as well as prescription medicines.
- Physical factors such as scratching the skin, pressure on the skin, cold, heat, exercise, or sunlight.
- Allergic rhinitis, or hay fever. However, these types of allergies rarely cause chronic hives.
- Food allergies. Watch for symptoms that occur within 1 hour after eating a certain food (such as fish, shellfish, peanuts and other nuts, eggs, and berries). However, it may be much longer than 1 hour before hives appear.
- Infections, such as hepatitis, mononucleosis, and even the common cold.
- A variety of diseases.

Tests for chronic hives often do not find a cause. The tests are done mostly to rule out more serious conditions that could be causing the problem. Chronic hives and swelling can be frustrating, but they usually are not serious.

## **How long do hives and swelling usually last?**

When hives and swelling last more than 6 weeks despite treatment, they are called "chronic." A single spot of hives may last less than 36 hours, but the problem may come and go for weeks or months.

In most people, the problem often lasts less than 1 year and almost always goes away within 5 years.

## **What can you do at home for hives and swelling?**

- If you know what causes your hives and swelling—such as a certain food or medicine—avoid it when you can. However, you may not know the cause.
- Use cool, wet cloths to soothe the itchy or painful area. A warm (not hot) bath or shower may also help.
- Take an antihistamine such as loratadine (Claritin). The medicine will not cure the problem, but it will help control the hives and swelling. Be sure to read and follow the instructions on the label. Your doctor may also recommend diphenhydramine (Benadryl) or chlorpheniramine (Chlor-Trimeton). These drugs can make you feel sleepy and less alert. Do not drive while using them.
- If your doctor prescribes an oral corticosteroid (such as prednisone) or another medicine, take it exactly as directed.

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- If you have a known severe allergy, such as to bee stings or to a food such as peanuts, ask your doctor whether you should carry an allergy kit (Epi-Pen or Ana-Kit). The kit has antihistamine pills and a shot of epinephrine to use in case you have a bad reaction.

### **When should you call Kaiser Permanente?**

- Hives occur with dizziness, wheezing, breathing problems, tightness in your chest, or swelling of the lips, tongue, or face. **Call 911.**
- Your throat is swelling, and it's hard to breathe. **Call 911.**
- You get hives after you start a new medicine.
- Hives and swelling get worse, and your medicine does not help. You may need another type of medicine.

### **Where can you get more information on chronic hives and swelling?**

- *Log on:* [members.kp.org/health advice/health encyclopedia/ Allergic Reaction health topic](http://members.kp.org/health_advice/health_encyclopedia/)
- *Look in:* Kaiser Permanente Healthwise Handbook: Skin Problems chapter, Hives topic  
Need a book? Contact your health education or member services department.
- *Listen to:* Kaiser Permanente Healthphone: 1-800-332-7563