

Clinics B1A and B1B

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Department of RHEUMATOLOGY, ALLERGY AND IMMUNOLOGY

Chronic Urticaria



What are Urticaria and Angioedema?

Urticaria, also known as “hives”, occurs due to fluid leaking out from blood vessels in the skin. This causes swelling on the surface of the skin.

Urticaria is characterised by red, itchy bumps on the skin’s surface. These may come in different shapes and sizes, appearing in certain parts of the body, or covering large areas of the body. The skin will return to its normal appearance in around 24 hours.

Angioedema occurs when swelling develops in the deeper layers of the skin. Swelling can happen around the eyes, on the lips and tongue, and even internally in the windpipe. This may last for about 48 to 72 hours.

Urticaria and angioedema commonly occur together but may also occur separately.

What Causes Urticaria and Angioedema?

Urticaria and angioedema occur when certain cells in the body (called mast cells) become activated and release chemicals (such as Histamine and Bradykinin) into your bloodstream.

These chemicals make your small blood vessels enlarge and become leaky. Fluid then leaks out from the vessels into the surface of the skin.

What is Chronic Urticaria?

Urticaria may be acute or chronic.

In acute urticaria, the hives disappear completely within a few days. Acute urticaria develops either after an allergic trigger such as food, medication, insect stings and/or physical contact with allergens.

In chronic urticaria, the hives last for more than 6 weeks. Chronic urticaria may be caused by certain medical conditions such as such as thyroid disorders, blood disorders (e.g. leukemia or lymphoma) and certain autoimmune diseases.

Chronic urticaria can be classified as:

- Chronic Spontaneous Urticaria, when there are no triggers identified. This is the most common type of chronic urticaria
- Chronic Inducible Urticaria, when the urticaria is triggered by physical factors such as heat, cold, pressure, or vibration.

If you are newly diagnosed with chronic urticaria, your doctor may advise you to undergo some blood tests to exclude these conditions.

Urticaria can affect your quality of life. It is unpredictable and intensely itchy, which can interfere with your sleep and activity.

The good news is that chronic urticaria is not a life-threatening or contagious condition, and can easily be treated in most people.

How is Chronic Urticaria treated?

Treatment of chronic urticaria involves identifying and avoiding triggers, as well as using medications.

In the case of chronic urticaria, your doctor will advise using second-generation antihistamine tablets regularly.

These medications may cause side effects like sleepiness and dizziness; however, most people do not experience these effects. If you do encounter these side effects, please inform your doctor who will adjust your treatment accordingly.

For those who do not respond to this treatment, your doctor may recommend a drug called Omalizumab. Omalizumab is a biologic drug administered as a monthly subcutaneous injection under the skin. Treatment with Omalizumab is usually required for 6 months.

If the above medication does not work, your doctor may consider options like immunosuppressants, immunomodulators, and/or anti-inflammatory agents to help manage your symptoms.

Urticaria management aims to find a safe treatment plan to help control your hives.