

Patient education: Chronic hives (The Basics)

[Written by the doctors and editors at UpToDate](#)

What are chronic hives? — Hives are raised, red patches of skin that are usually very itchy ([picture 1](#)). Each patch lasts less than a day, but they appear in groups. Hives can appear anywhere on the body. The medical term for hives is "urticaria." "Chronic" means long-term. People who have chronic hives have them on most days for 6 weeks or more.

Chronic hives are different from hives that happen suddenly and last only a short time. Hives that only last hours or a few days might be caused by an allergy or an infection. Sometimes, sudden hives means someone is having a life-threatening allergic reaction. When this happens, the person has other symptoms with the hives, such as trouble breathing or passing out.

Chronic hives are not caused by allergies or infections, and are not life-threatening. But they are very itchy and can make it hard to concentrate or sleep. Chronic hives usually go away over time in most people, but they can last years in other people. There is no cure for chronic hives, but medicines can help ease symptoms.

What are the symptoms of chronic hives? — People with chronic hives have raised, red areas on their skin. These areas are often round and can be pale in the middle. They are usually very itchy, especially at night.

The hives will come and go, but certain things can make symptoms worse. These include:

- Heat, such as hot showers or hot, humid weather
- Tight clothes, waistbands, or clothing straps
- Medicines called nonsteroidal antiinflammatory drugs (NSAIDs) – NSAIDs are a large group of medicines that includes aspirin, ibuprofen (sample brand names: Advil, Motrin), and naproxen (sample brand name: Aleve).
- Alcohol
- Stress
- Certain foods, such as spicy foods
- Having a cold
- Not getting enough sleep

Many people with chronic hives also get a condition called "angioedema." Angioedema causes puffiness and swelling of the tissues under the skin. Parts of the body that are often affected include the lips, cheeks, eyelids, hands, feet, or genitals ([picture 2](#)).

Will I need tests? — Probably not. Your doctor or nurse should be able to tell if you have chronic hives by learning about your symptoms and doing an exam.

He or she might order blood tests to make sure another condition isn't causing your symptoms.

How are chronic hives treated? — Chronic hives usually go away over time. Many people get better within a year, but the condition can last a few years. To help with symptoms, doctors can prescribe different medicines. Most people need to take more than 1 medicine every day to control their symptoms. Medicines can include:

- Antihistamines – These are the same medicines people commonly take for allergies. They can help with itching and shrink the size of your hives.
- Steroid pills – Your doctor might prescribe steroids for a short time to help get your symptoms under control. These are **not** the same as the steroids that some athletes take illegally. These steroids help reduce itching and swelling.

If these medicines don't help enough to ease your symptoms, let your doctor or nurse know. There are other medicines or treatments that might help. Over-the-counter creams or lotions usually don't help.

Is there anything I can do on my own to feel better? — Yes. You can avoid the things that commonly make chronic hives worse. For example, avoid taking NSAIDs or drinking alcohol. Avoid hot showers or tight-fitting clothes that rub or pinch your skin. Get enough sleep.

Chronic hives are not caused by food allergies, but some people find that their chronic hives get worse after they eat certain foods. If your hives get worse when you eat certain foods, try to avoid those foods. But if you find that you are avoiding a lot of foods, let your doctor or nurse know.

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GRAPHICS

Hives



Hives are raised, red patches of skin that are usually very itchy. They usually come and go within a few hours, but they can show up again and again in some people.

Courtesy of Andrew Samel, MD.

Graphic 79242 Version 6.0

Angioedema of the lips



Angioedema causes puffiness of the tissues under the skin, often in the face. This photo shows angioedema of the lips.

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