

URTICARIA INFORMATION SHEET

Background:

Urticaria ('nettle rash' or 'hives') which occurs repeatedly without a close relationship to a food is unlikely to be allergic. It is a common condition and may range from being a mild inconvenience to being severe and troublesome.

Allergic reactions are conditions mediated by the body's immune system in various ways. An allergic reaction occurs when the body's immune system reacts to normally harmless foreign substances such as grass pollen, egg, peanut, cat etc. . . . An allergic person's immune system considers these substances dangerous and attempts to defend the body by producing **antibodies** to the particular substance.

Cells called **mast cells** are found throughout the body, from the lining of the nose to the skin and the digestive system. They contain many chemicals, including a substance called **histamine**. An individual's allergic antibodies join together with these mast cells and activate them. Once activated they release their histamine which causes nearby cells to respond with itching, swelling and other symptoms of allergy.

Non-Allergic Urticaria

Mast cells can also be activated by non-allergic mechanisms which do not involve allergic antibodies. However, many people are not aware that this can happen and are convinced that they are allergic to something. Most allergic reactions are instant and the cause is obvious. With non-allergic urticaria, this is not the case.

Why does this happen?

There may be many causes. Some of the most common include:

- After a viral infection
- In association with physical influences such as heat, cold, pressure
- Spontaneously, with no identifiable cause (80% of patients)

Types of Urticaria:

- **Acute:** An individual patch of urticaria disappears within 24 hours. However, patches of urticaria may come and go, and are termed 'acute' if they last for less than 6 weeks.
- **Chronic:** Urticaria lasting longer than 6 weeks.

- **Angioedema:** This is the name given to deeper tissue swelling. This commonly lasts for more than 24 hours and may occur in conjunction with urticaria. It is usually not possible to identify a cause.

Investigations

Usually, investigations are not helpful except in ruling out an allergic cause. Skin prick tests are usually negative and there are no good laboratory tests available.

Treatment of Urticaria

Antihistamines are the usual treatment for individuals whose life is significantly affected by their urticaria and angioedema. They may be taken either at the onset of an episode, although when episodes occur very frequently they may need to be taken preventatively.

In some individuals, additional medications are also required. These include drugs such as Ranitidine which, when taken daily with an antihistamine, work to prevent episodes occurring.

Outcome:

In most individuals with no clear cause, the urticaria will eventually resolve. However, 20% will still have symptoms after 10 years.