**Chronic Hives**

(1) Hives are a type of skin rash. Hives are very different from other kinds of skin rashes because hives appear quickly, disappear quickly, and vanish without a trace.

Hives are usually itchy and bumpy, and they are often reddish or pinkish in color. Some people call them welts. Any individual hive or welt that appears will generally disappear within a day. Often, a hive will disappear within hours, or even disappear within minutes. And when hives disappear, it is as if they were never there. The skin where the hive was goes back to normal.

Hives don’t leave a dark spot or a dry spot or a scaly spot on the skin. They just disappear. But then the hives might come back. They might come back in the same place or they might come back in a different place on the body. Hives can keep coming and going, popping up here and there in different places on the body for days, weeks, or even months at a time. But any individual hive shouldn’t stay in the same place for more than one day. If it does, then you need to start wondering if it is really a hive after all.

Other types of rashes can look like hives. But other types of rashes don’t behave like hives. Hives are pretty much the only kind of rash that tends to appear quickly, disappear quickly, and vanish without a trace.

(2) Until very recently, not too much was known about what causes hives. So there was a lot of confusion and misunderstanding about the cause of hives, and there still is.

But now, that mystery has been solved thanks to some great research that has been done in the past few years. Now we know that hives can be caused by the immune system.

The immune system is tremendously powerful and tremendously complicated. The job of the immune system is to attack things. Things like viruses and bacteria that we all get exposed to, that get into our bodies, and would grow in our bodies and make us sick and kill us unless we had a good strong immune system to attack and kill them first. Thank goodness we do.

Because the immune system is so powerful and so complicated, it is not that unusual for something to go wrong with the immune system to cause it to attack something that doesn’t need to be attacked. Hives are a good example of that. Sometimes, the immune system can attack a person’s own skin and cause the hives to appear. Thankfully, when the immune system starts attacking or stimulating the skin to cause hives, it is typically not a bad thing, or a dangerous thing, or a sign that anything bad or dangerous is going on. Luckily, hives will usually go away on their own once the immune system settles down and stops attacking the skin to trigger the hives.

(3) People wonder if hives are due to allergies. The answer is yes and no, mostly no. It is true that hives CAN be due to an allergy. For example, when people who are allergic to shrimp eat shrimp, they will typically break out in hives. And it usually doesn’t take long for people who are allergic to shrimp to figure out that they had better not eat shrimp if they don’t want to break out in hives.
HOWEVER, and this is very important, hives do not have to be due to an allergy. In fact, hives are frequently not due to any kind of allergy at all. Allergy means something outside of the body is causing the hives. Something like a food or a medication that gets into the body from the outside to cause the hives to occur. We now know that hives don’t have to come from outside the body. They can come from inside the body, due simply to overactivity of the immune system.

Once we learned that hives can come from inside the body due to overactivity of the immune system, we discovered something very important. When hives keep breaking out randomly, unpredictably, for weeks and weeks at a time, they are pretty much not due to any kind of allergy. They are simply due to overactivity of the immune system.

(4). People wonder if their hives can be cured. We do not have a medication that will fix your immune system and make it stop attacking your skin to cause the hives. Maybe in the future, when we know more, we will have a medication that will fix the immune system to prevent it from causing the hives. But for now, there is no cure for the hives.

Fortunately, the immune system will usually fix itself and stop attacking the skin, and the hives will go away. We just don’t know exactly when that will happen, and it’s different for different people.

For most people, the hives will go away within a few weeks, or maybe a few months. On occasion, the hives can go on for many months, or even years. In the mean time, since we don’t have a medicine that will fix the immune system, we do the best we can to keep the hives from being much of a problem with the medications that we do have. And fortunately, that usually works pretty well.

(5) We do have medications that are very safe and can usually treat the hives very well by stopping the itching and rashes from occurring. The medications we like to use to treat hives are called antihistamine medications.

Antihistamine medications are extremely safe. If you had to take a medication every day for the rest of your life, it would be difficult to find a safer medication than the non-sedating antihistamine medications that we use to treat hives.

So how does that work? If you break out in hives fairly often, like a few times a week or more, we will recommend an antihistamine medication to take every day, to prevent the hives and itching from occurring.

Sometimes we need to adjust the dose of the medication, to get the right dose of antihistamine medication into your body to prevent the hives from appearing. Once we find the right dose of medication, we will recommend that you continue taking that dose of medication every day, to keep you from being bothered by itching and hives while we wait for your immune system to fix itself, stop attacking your skin, and stop causing the hives.

Every few weeks or so, you can try stopping the medication to see if you no longer need it. Once your immune system settles back down to normal and stops attacking your skin, you will no longer need to take the antihistamine medication.

We cannot predict how long your immune system will be attacking your skin to cause the hives. That is why we ask you to take the antihistamine medication daily for a few weeks at a time; and try stopping the medication periodically to see if you no longer need it.

We are lucky to have medications that are very safe and generally effective to prevent hives and the itching that goes along with the hives. These medications are so safe that they are available over the counter, no prescription necessary.

In rare cases, where antihistamines are not doing the job, stronger medications can be considered.