

Urticaria (Hives): Hives are an inflammation of the skin triggered when the immune system releases histamine. This causes small blood vessels to leak, which leads to swelling in the skin. Swelling in deep layers of the skin is called angioedema. There are two kinds of urticaria, acute and chronic. Acute urticaria occurs after eating a particular food or coming in contact with a particular trigger. It can also be triggered by non-allergic causes such as heat or exercise, as well as medications, foods or insect bites. Chronic urticaria is rarely caused by specific triggers and so allergy tests are usually not helpful. Chronic urticaria can last for many months or years. Although they are often uncomfortable and sometimes painful, hives are not contagious.

Angioedema: Angioedema is swelling in the deep layers of the skin. It is often seen together with urticaria (hives). Angioedema many times occurs in soft tissues such as the eyelids, mouth or genitals. Angioedema is called "acute" if the condition lasts only a short time such as minutes to hours. Acute angioedema is commonly caused by an allergic reaction to medications or foods. Chronic recurrent angioedema is when the condition returns over a long period of time. It typically does not have an identifiable cause. Hereditary angioedema (HAE) is a rare, but serious genetic condition involving swelling in various body parts including the hands, feet, face, intestinal wall and airways. It does not respond to treatment with antihistamines or adrenaline so it is important to go see a specialist.

Symptoms

Urticaria is itchy, red and white raised bumps or welts that range in size and can appear anywhere on the body. Angioedema often appears on the face around the eyes, cheeks or lips. This deeper layer of swelling can also occur on hands, feet, genitals, or inside the bowels or throat.

Diagnosis

In the majority of chronic cases, the exact cause cannot be determined. Routine testing such as general blood counts or screens are not cost-effective, nor do these tests make a difference in treatment strategies to relieve the symptoms. There are certain instances when allergy testing is helpful, especially when eating a particular food or coming in contact with a particular substance triggers symptoms of acute hives.

Adapted from: <http://www.aaaai.org/conditions-and-treatments/allergies/skin-allergy.aspx>

