

What is Urticaria?

Urticaria (also known as nettle rash) is a widespread rash consisting of short-lived itchy redness and small swellings (known as wheals). The main symptom of urticarias is itching.

There are a few different types of urticaria depending on what triggers it. They are classified as **acute urticaria**, **chronic idiopathic urticaria**, **physical urticarias** (caused by different physical stimuli) and **genetic urticaria** (hereditary angio-oedema).

Acute urticaria

Acute urticaria is caused by allergens such as pollens, food products, drugs etc. It may last from one day up to a few weeks.

Chronic idiopathic urticaria

Chronic idiopathic urticaria, with or without occasional episodes of angio-oedema (see box) is a condition that may last for ten or more years, but in around 60% of sufferers not longer than 2-3 years. It can be precipitated by drugs (aspirin, non-steroid anti-inflammatory medications such as ibuprofen, ACE-inhibitors used by people with high blood pressure, penicillin and morphine), some foods (shellfish, food additives etc), infections and stress. Very often it is impossible to identify the precipitating factor. Heat may make it worse. Urticaria may come and go on a daily basis or in some people once every few days or sometimes weeks. Wheals are accompanied occasionally by stomach or joint pains. People with chronic idiopathic urticaria often also have physical urticaria.

Angio-oedema

Angio-oedema is a sudden occurrence of one or more big transitory swellings under the skin and mucous membranes. They can sometimes be painful. They are often found in the head, neck and throat.

Vibratory angio-oedema is a short-lived swelling precipitated by vibration, for example through use of a pneumatic drill or lawn mower, or following motorcycling or jogging. Sometimes the condition is hereditary.

Physical urticarias

Dermographism is caused by linear pressure applied to the skin. Light or firm stroking of the skin brings up linear wheals. Sometimes even light rubbing of clothes against the skin provokes intensive itching, which subsequently becomes even worse after scratching. It some women it makes having sex very uncomfortable.

Pressure urticaria occurs at sites of local pressure (eg the waist, soles of the feet, palms of the hands after holding something tight). Painful swellings under the skin normally arise a few hours after the pressure has been applied.

Chronic pruritus

Cholinergic urticaria is provoked by heat, exercise and stress. Sometimes it is called *stress urticaria*. Exercise-induced asthma, headache, faintness and palpitations may be associated symptoms. Cholinergic urticaria presents as very itchy little pimples on a red base. The rash is usually symmetrical and appears on the trunk and limbs. It occurs 10-15 minutes after provocation and lasts 20-40 minutes. Some people develop only itching and no rash; this condition is known as **chronic pruritus**.

Aquagenic urticaria is seen very rarely. It is a reaction to water of any temperature and the rash looks like cholinergic urticaria. Sometimes it presents only as itching and in such cases is called **aquagenic pruritus**.

Solar urticaria occurs only in light-exposed areas and can be provoked by sunlight or artificial. Redness, itching and wheals develop immediately after the exposure.

Cold urticaria is a reaction to cooling of the skin. It occurs in exposed areas of the skin in cold weather after touching cold objects (eg food in the fridge), and presents with itching red swellings. Reaction is immediate and sometimes associated with faintness, difficulty in breathing and palpitations. People with cold urticaria should avoid swimming in the sea and unheated pools.

Urticaria is in some ways a disease of the mast cells, which live in the skin and mucous membranes. These cells contain a chemical substance called **histamine**. The release of histamine by the mast cells causes itchiness, redness and swelling of the skin and mucous membranes. That is why a group of medications called **antihistamines** is the main treatment for urticaria and angio-oedema.

Dermatology

Urticaria (nettle rash)



Information for patients.

Date of publication: October 2009

Date for review: October 2011

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