

# What are hives, the common skin condition that gives you itchy, red bumps?

9 October 2019, by Rodney Sinclair



We don't know exactly what causes hives, seen here as raised, red bumps or wheals. Credit: [www.shutterstock.com](http://www.shutterstock.com)

Have you ever wondered who buys those huge boxes of [antihistamines](#) prominently displayed all year round in your local pharmacy? If [antihistamines](#) were just used for hay fever, you'd think sales would be good in spring, but pretty mediocre for the rest of the year.

Many of the antihistamines sold in Australia are actually for [hives](#), or what doctors call urticaria. Hives produces multiple red, raised bumps (or wheals) that are incredibly itchy. Hives occurs all year round.

The condition is really [common](#), with a Korean study showing around 22% of people can expect to have it at some time in their life.

Some people also get [angioedema](#), where small blood vessels leak fluid into the tissues, causing spectacular swelling. If the swelling affects your throat and airways you can suffocate.

Fortunately, for the vast majority of people, hives comes and goes in a couple of weeks. While you can feel pretty miserable when you have it, antihistamines work [well](#) to control the rash and itch. Suffocation is exceptionally rare.

## When hives won't go away

If you are unlucky enough to still have hives after six weeks, it's [likely to persist](#) six months, six years or even 26 years later.

This is what dermatologists call chronic urticaria, which affects [about 1%](#) of the population (around 250,000 Australians). The itch, sleep disturbance, swelling and rash associated with it severely impair people's quality of life. Of all [skin diseases](#), chronic urticaria seems to worsen your [mood and disrupt day-to-day living](#) the most.

One [antihistamine](#) tablet is usually enough to control hay fever. But people with chronic urticaria may need two, three or sometimes four tablets a day to control their itch. Even that may not be enough to stop the wheals.

## What causes hives?

So what causes hives? If your hives go away within six weeks, you probably had them because of a delayed reaction to a viral infection. Sometimes this acute condition is caused by an allergic reaction to a medication; an antibiotic allergy is a common cause. Occasionally a food allergy causes hives.

What about chronic urticaria, when hives last more than six weeks? Doctors don't know the exact cause. While patients often suspect a food allergy, doctors rarely find a food trigger.

But we know [autoimmunity](#) is involved, when the body's immune system targets itself.

Most patients with chronic urticaria have [antibodies](#)

against their own immune system. In particular, these antibodies target molecules critical to a normal allergic response (immunoglobulin E, or IgE, and its receptor).

### **When antihistamines don't work**

If antihistamines don't help, there are other options.

Medications that specifically target IgE and get to the root cause of urticaria autoimmunity are now available, provided you meet all the [special criteria](#). Only dermatologists are allowed to prescribe this medicine on the PBS.

To date, [omalizumab](#) has been the most [effective treatment](#) for [chronic urticaria](#) patients who don't respond to antihistamines. It's given as an injection under the skin every four weeks. Unfortunately symptoms [in fewer than 50%](#) of patients are completely controlled.

A new drug ligelizumab, which is still in [clinical trials](#), is showing promise, according to international research we were involved with [published recently](#) in the *New England Journal of Medicine*. However, this experimental drug, which also targets IgE autoimmunity, is only available in Australia [as part of a clinical trial](#).

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