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HEALTHWISE

Urticaria and angioedema

Sudden attacks of itchy lumps distressing



‘Angioedema of the tongue or airways can be dangerous because it can interfere with breathing’

Dr. Sujoy Khan, Immunologist,
Apollo Gleneagles Hospitals, Kolkata

A sudden outbreak of swollen, pale red lumps, patches, or welts on the skin, a condition called urticaria or hives, can be very itchy and distressing, but is not dangerous always.

‘Urticaria is a skin condition with raised, itchy lumps, like nettle stings that appears suddenly, from allergies, or for other reasons. These lumps can appear anywhere on the body, including the face, lips, tongue, throat, or ears. Each crop of skin lesions usually lasts less than a day, but fresh crops can appear one after the other,’ says Dr. Sujoy Khan, Immunologist, AGH, Kolkata.

Hives usually vary in size, lasting for hours, or even up to several days before fading. ‘Episodes that linger for more than

six weeks are called chronic urticaria, while shorter attacks are called acute urticaria. Acute urticaria is more common - around 20 per cent of the population has an episode at some time in their life.’ Dr. Khan adds.

Angioedema is similar to urticaria, but the swelling happens beneath the skin instead of on the surface. It is usually characterized by deep swelling around the eyes and lips and sometimes of the genitals, hands and feet. ‘Angioedema of the tongue or airways can be dangerous because it can interfere with breathing’, alerts Dr. Khan. Urticaria is much more common, some people get a mixture of the two, and a few get angioedema alone.

‘There are many causes of urticaria or angioede-

ma. While acute episodes can be caused by an allergy, the vast majority of chronic urticarias are not allergic. In fact, most cases of urticaria are unexplained and called chronic idiopathic urticaria. A thorough history and examination will be required to determine whether or not there is an identifiable cause for your urticaria or angioedema,’ Dr. Khan stresses.

Blood tests may be required to rule out other causes of itching and/or swellings. The main treatment for urticaria is anti-histamine medications. Other treatments include: blocking other parts of the histamine system, using steroids or immunosuppressive drugs and using other drugs to interfere with the chemicals released by mast cells.