Stinging Nettle Rash

Nettle is a broad leafed plant that causes a hive -like rash and burning (*urticaria*) after being touched. The rash is caused by hairs on the leaves of the nettle plant. When you brush past the plant, these tiny hairs break off in your skin and release formic acid into your skin. This also causes histamine to be released by cells in the skin. Both of these chemicals are irritating to the skin. Both chemicals contribute to the rash. The rash is from a build-up of fluid in the skin.

In severe cases, this may be followed by swelling in other parts of the body as well. If swelling occurs around the eyes, lips, tongue, larynx or hands it is called angioneurotic oedema.

Any allergic rash, such as urticaria or hives, may be called nettle rash even though they may not be from the nettle plant.

SYMPTOMS

Some of the problems caused are:

- A burning or stinging sensation.
- Red itchy swelling (*wheals*).
- Itchy, white bumps that can last up to 24 hours but can occur repeatedly.
- Cramps, diarrhea and wheezing can happen with a severe allergic reaction.

DIAGNOSIS

The diagnosis of nettle rash is made easily by the history of coming in contact with stinging nettle. You usually know about the contact immediately from symptoms produced by the plant. Your caregiver will also know from the history given and by examining you.

TREATMENT

- Mild cases can generally be treated at home. In more severe cases, you should consult your caregiver.
- As soon as you can find water, wash the exposed area. The discomfort generally goes away almost immediately.
- You may use an over-the-counter antihistamine (*diphenhydramine*) for hives and itching as needed. Do not drive or drink alcohol until medications used to treat the reaction have worn off. Antihistamines tend to make people sleepy.
- Apply cold cloths (*compresses*) to the skin or take baths in cool water. This will help itching. Avoid hot baths or showers. Heat will make the rash and itching worse.
- A paste made of baking soda and water applied to the rash may help relieve itching.
- Calamine lotion and/or aloe vera applied to rash will give relief. Sunscreen with aloe vera can be used.

SEEK IMMEDIATE MEDICAL CARE IF YOU DEVELOP:

- Difficulty breathing, wheezing, or you have a tight feeling in your chest or throat.
- A swollen mouth or have hives, swelling, or itching all over your body.
- A severe reaction with any of the above problems **should be considered life threatening.**

If you suddenly develop difficulty breathing, call for local emergency medical help. THIS IS AN EMERGENCY.

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