

Cold Induced Hives and Anaphylaxis

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As winter approaches, many of us are flinching at the thought of snowflakes. But for a small group of people, cold causes more than discomfort, it can be deadly. These people are the fewer than one in a hundred who suffer from "cold-induced urticaria".

The urticaria part of your condition is the development of painful itchy, welts as your skin warms up after being out in the cold. The anaphylaxis part is even more rare and in this severe reaction there are additional symptoms including wheezing, difficulty breathing, faintness and unconsciousness leading to death.

The trigger for these symptoms is not the cold temperature itself, but the change in temperature. Going from hot to cold to hot again where the variation between the hot and the cold is over 15 deg C can raise welts. Going from the house to skate or ski or shovel snow, and then come back inside can trigger the condition. So can being out in the summer, going into highly air-conditioned surroundings and then outside again.

The best test for the condition is to place an ice cube on the skin. Those with cold urticaria will get an itchy, swollen welt on the skin.

The best treatment for the skin symptoms is a prescribed antihistamine. If the symptoms involve more than the skin, your allergist might recommend avoidance of situations which cause a reaction, plus carrying adrenaline.

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