Serum Sickness

Serum sickness is a type of allergic reaction that may occur 7-14 days after you have been given an anti-serum or anti-venom. Serum is the clear fluid part of blood.

Signs and symptoms

- Itchy rash - usually red with white wheals (hives or urticaria), which occur in batches or clusters.
- Joint pain - the joints may become swollen or red.
- Enlarged glands (swollen lymph nodes)
- Fever and viral-like illness
- The rash may last for days or weeks.

Causes

Your immune system (which fights infections) may respond to a molecule, such as the horse serum in snake anti-venom, as being foreign and mistakenly think it is harmful. If you have had the horse derived anti-venom previously, serum sickness may develop more quickly.

Treatment

Serum sickness will go away by itself. The rash does not cause scarring

Your doctor may recommend treatment, which may include:

- Medications, such as prednisolone
- Pain relief such as paracetamol or ibuprofen
- Cool compresses to relieve itch
- Antihistamines to relieve itch

Key points to remember

This type of skin rash and swelling is an allergic reaction, which means the immune system responds to a substance as if it were toxic.

- Treatment options include ice packs, paracetamol, ibuprofen, antihistamines and corticosteroids.
- It will go away without treatment, usually over 2 weeks
- If it is not improving in 2 weeks, see your family doctor

Contact Information

For more information or if you have any concerns, call your GP or the Victorian Poisons Information Centre on 131126

Developed by the RCH Emergency Department First published 2016.