

ALLERGY SKIN TESTING

What are allergies?

Our immune system is designed to protect us against harmful things like bacteria, viruses, and parasites. However, sometimes our immune system reacts to other things in the environment. Allergy is the term used to describe the over-reaction of our immune system to something that would otherwise be harmless in our environment. We call the specific particles that we are allergic to *allergens*. Common allergens include pollens from trees, grasses, and weeds. These allergens naturally increase during certain times of the year. Other common allergens include dust mite, cockroach, fungi, and animal dander. It is our body's reaction to these things that causes the common allergy symptoms of sneezing, itchy nose and eyes, runny nose, and congestion. Allergies are also known to cause asthma symptoms to worsen.

How does allergy testing work?

If you have some of these symptoms then your doctor may want to perform allergy skin testing to determine your specific allergens. Allergy skin testing can be performed by one of several methods. In prick testing a device with multiple small plastic points is placed in different allergen extracts and then used to prick the skin. This will deposit a tiny amount of the extract in the superficial layer of the skin. The skin will react by forming a small raised area of swelling at the prick site if you are allergic to that particular allergen. Prick testing is often done as the initial allergy skin test.

Another way to perform skin testing is by using a small needle and syringe to inject a tiny amount of allergen extract into the superficial layers of the skin. This is similar to a TB test. The skin will react in a similar manner if you are allergic to that particular allergen.

What are the benefits of allergy skin testing?

Testing in this manner will enable you and your doctor to determine if you have inhalant allergies and will also reveal which allergens you react to. This will help guide your treatment.

What are the risks of allergy skin testing?

Allergy skin testing is very common and is considered to be quite safe. If you are allergic you may have some localized swelling, redness, and itching. More severe reactions are possible but they are very rare. If you have ever had a severe allergic reaction during allergy skin testing then you should not have any more skin testing. A blood test can be used instead. If you have asthma and currently are having bad symptoms related to your asthma, then it is not a good time to do allergy skin testing.

Before allergy testing:

Be sure that your doctor has a complete list of your medications because some medications will affect skin testing. For example, if you are on any antihistamines, these must be stopped for at least 5 days prior to testing.