



Skin Testing

Allergy skin testing is done to find out exactly what things a person may be allergic to. This fact sheet explains different types of skin tests and what the results mean.

With my mom's help, I kept a record of my allergy symptoms for 2 weeks. I wrote down when I had my symptoms, how long they lasted, where I was, what I was doing, and medicines I took for them. My doctor reviewed the record but still couldn't figure out what I was allergic to. So he referred me to an allergy expert for skin testing, which showed I was allergic to mold. The next step was to get rid of the mold in our home.*

Jamie, age 17

How are skin tests done?

There are two types of skin tests:

Prick or scratch test. In this test, a tiny drop of a possible allergen—something you are allergic to—is pricked or scratched into the skin. (This is also called a percutaneous [per-kyoo-TAY-nee-us] test.) It is the most common type of skin test.

Intradermal test. This test shows whether someone is allergic to things such as insect stings and penicillin. A small amount of the possible allergen is injected under the skin through a thin needle.

What can I expect during a skin test?

Skin tests are done in an allergist's (allergy expert) office.

Prick or scratch test and intradermal test

Anywhere from 10 to 50 different allergens are tested. It takes about 5 to 10 minutes to place the allergens on your skin. They are usually put on the forearm in adults and on the back in children. Then you will wait about 15 minutes to see if a small red lump appears where any of the allergens are.

The prick or scratch test and intradermal test may hurt slightly. If you are sensitive to any of the allergens, your skin may itch where the allergen was placed.

How should I prepare for the test?

Tell your doctor about all medicines you're taking, including over-the-counter medicines.

Don't take antihistamines for 3 to 7 days before the test. Ask your doctor when to stop taking them. (It's okay to use nose (nasal) steroid sprays and asthma medicines. They will not interfere with skin tests.)



What is an allergy?

An allergy occurs when you react to things like pollen or cats that don't affect most people. If you come into contact with something you are allergic to (called an allergen), you may have symptoms such as itching or sneezing. This is called an allergic reaction.



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Is the test safe?

Very small amounts of allergens are tested on your skin, so skin testing is safe. During the test, a doctor will watch for a possible allergic reaction, but it rarely happens.

What do the skin test results mean?

If you're sensitive to an allergen:

With the prick or scratch test and intradermal test, a small red bump appears on the skin where that allergen was placed, and this area may itch. The larger the bump, the more sensitive you may be to it.

These results are called positive skin tests and mean that you may be allergic to the allergen tested.

Even if a skin test shows that you're allergic to something, you may not react to it when you're exposed to it later. Your doctor will review your medical history and skin test results to help find out what you're allergic to. See AAFA's fact sheet, Basic Facts About Allergies.

What happens if the skin test shows I have allergies?

Your doctor will create a plan for controlling your allergies. This means preventing and treating symptoms. Take these steps:

- Avoid or limit contact with your allergens. For example, if you're allergic to dust mites, reduce the clutter in your house, which collects dust.
- Take medicine to relieve your symptoms. Your doctor may prescribe medicines such as antihistamines, decongestants, nose (nasal) sprays, or eye drops.
- Get allergy shots if the doctor says you should. Some people need them when they can't avoid an allergen. The shots contain a tiny but increasing amount of the allergen you're sensitive to. Over time, your body becomes used to the allergen and no longer reacts to it.

Who does skin testing to diagnose allergies?

Allergists are experts who test for and treat allergies. Your doctor can refer you to an allergy specialist.

Does health insurance cover skin testing for allergies?

Most health insurance plans cover allergy testing and treatment. Ask your insurance carrier:

1. Do I need a referral from my doctor to see an allergy expert?
2. Does my insurance cover patient education or special services for my allergies?
3. Does my insurance cover a pre-existing health problem? This usually means any health problem that you had before you joined your current health plan.
4. What allergy testing and medicines does my plan cover?

For More Information

The Asthma and Allergy Foundation of America offers many fact sheets on asthma and allergies. You can order them by e-mail or toll-free telephone call or print copies from AAFA's website.

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