Get Tested: The First Step Toward Taking Control of Allergies

Allergy testing can help those who have allergic disease find out what makes them sneeze and wheeze. A correct diagnosis helps allergists tailor effective treatment plans to each patient’s needs. Today’s allergy tests are more convenient, accurate and relatively painless.

- Allergy tests are performed using either skin tests or blood tests. Allergists consider skin tests to be the most reliable and accurate method. Allergist-immunologists are physicians who specialize in treating allergies and asthma. They are at the forefront of developing and applying guidelines for the practice of allergy testing and treatment based on the latest medical advances.

- Effective allergy testing requires specialist knowledge of patient symptoms, local allergens and how different allergens react when combined. Even positive skin tests must be evaluated in light of patient symptoms. For example, a patient can test positive for allergy to cat dander even though the patient has no symptoms when exposed to cats. Accurate allergy diagnosis also depends upon choosing the right allergens for testing.

- There are two types of skin tests: percutaneous, also known as prick, puncture or scratch tests, and intracutaneous, also known as intradermal, tests. Results for both types of skin tests are obtained quickly, with positive reactions usually appearing in 15 to 20 minutes.

- The percutaneous tests prick or scratch the surface of the skin, introducing a tiny amount of a suspected allergen. On a per-test basis, this is the most convenient, most specific and least expensive test for IgE antibodies. The test is performed on a patient’s back or forearm with multiple allergens tested at once. A positive reaction causes redness and swelling to appear at the site of the scratch.

- Intracutaneous skin tests are sometimes performed if percutaneous test results are inconclusive, particularly for the diagnosis of allergy to insect venom. This test involves injecting the suspected allergen extract under the first few layers of skin with a syringe and a very fine needle.

- Blood tests, once known as radioallergensorbent testing (RAST), often are used to test for allergies when: a physician advises against the discontinuation of medications that can interfere with skin test results or cause medical complications; a patient suffers from severe skin conditions such as widespread eczema or psoriasis; or a patient has such a high sensitivity level to suspected allergens that any exposure to those allergens could result in potentially serious side effects.

- Blood tests are conducted by drawing a blood sample to be sent to a competent, certified laboratory, which analyzes the sample for the presence of antibodies to specific allergens. It can take up to several days to receive test results.

- Children and adults of all ages can be tested for allergies.

- Allergy tests can be conducted for most common allergies, including plant pollens, molds, dust mites, animal dander, insect stings, and various foods such as peanuts, eggs, wheat, shellfish and milk.