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Allergy Testing

Allergies seem to be on everyone's mind based on the questions I've been getting. That's prompted me to do my next webinar called *All About Allergies*. There's more information on the webinar at drchet.com. However, I wanted to talk about allergy testing today. I won't include it in the webinar because there are so many other things I need to cover. So today it's allergy testing and what's involved. Paula will also be giving you her experience with allergy testing—she's had it done several times.

Allergy Tests

By definition, allergy tests determine which substances trigger an allergic response in an individual. The reason allergy tests are used is to determine a course of treatment. In the case of food allergies, you can eliminate the problem by avoiding the food. When it comes to pollen, that's not really possible. Here are the different types of allergy tests.

Skin Tests

These are the most common form of allergy testing. The one most people probably have heard of is the prick test. This test involves placing a small amount of suspected allergy-causing substances on the skin, usually the forearm, upper arm, or the back. Then the skin is pricked so the allergen goes under the skin's surface. The allergist closely watches the skin for signs of a reaction, usually swelling and redness of the site. Results are usually seen within 15 to 20 minutes. This is an easy way to test dozens of allergens at the same time.

Intradermal skin tests are similar. A small amount of allergen is injected just under the skin and again watched for a reaction. This is usually done to determine if someone is allergic to something specific, such as bee venom or penicillin. I never had the test for penicillin, but I'm allergic. The last time I took penicillin, my eyes and lips swelled up; no further testing was required in that case.

Patch testing is a method to determine allergies to the skin. Suspected allergens are taped to the skin for 48 hours. The allergist examines the area after 24 hours, and then again 48 hours later.

Skin tests are most useful for diagnosing food allergies, mold, pollen, animal dander, penicillin, venom, and anything suspected of causing contact dermatitis.

Elimination Tests

Just as the name implies, foods are eliminated from the diet to check for food allergies. After being removed for several weeks, symptoms are tracked and then the foods are slowly re-introduced one at a time while the person is watched for signs of an allergic reaction.

Blood Tests

Blood tests can be done to measure the markers of an allergic response such as amount of immunoglobulin E (IgE) antibodies in the blood after exposure to a specific allergen. This test may be used when skin testing is not helpful or cannot be done.

Provocation (Challenge Testing)

Provocation testing is exactly what it sounds like: exposing a person to a suspected allergen to illicit a response under controlled circumstances. The allergen may be foods or exposure to something that is breathed in. But this

should be done only in the presence of a physician because it can provoke a severe allergic reaction. Let your allergist decide whether this is a good idea for you or not, but never try this yourself.

Paula's Experience

I'm allergic to dust, dander, mold, and the pollen of everything that grows. I've had skin tests several times, and it's a miserable experience: lie on a table with your back exposed while someone writes numbers on it, drops cold serum on it, then scratches it with a pin; then you lie there and wait for itching to develop. Fun, fun, fun. But I go through the tests as well as the shots—currently weekly, but progressing soon to monthly—because I know that allergies left untreated tend to worsen, and I'd probably have severe asthma by now, assuming it hadn't killed me.

But it's my first tests 48 years ago that I want to tell you about. The nurse started with intradermal tests on my arms—eight on each forearm. My arms got pink, then red up to my shoulders, then started to swell, and my breathing became labored. The doctor gave me a shot of epinephrine pretty darn quick to stop the asthma attack, and the tests were suspended for that day. Medicine has come a long way since then, but be aware that when you have tests, reactions can develop rapidly. If you or your child begins to show symptoms, such as redness, swelling, or tightness in your chest or airways, insist the nurse pause the tests to make sure the symptoms aren't spiraling out of control.

But do the tests and take the shots. It's worth it.

If you're a parent of a child starting allergy shots, it's going to be hard on all of you. No kid wants to be shot. Whenever I see a little one starting shots at my allergist's office, I want to tell them this: It hurts sometimes, but you can take it, and then you'll have bragging rights. Whenever the subject of shots comes up with your friends, you can tell them, "Don't be a baby. I get shots all the time, and it's no big deal." Go get 'em, tough guy—or girl!

The Bottom Line

Allergy testing can be very useful to determine what a person might be allergic to. So many people I talk with claim to be allergic to something and in reality, they don't really know because they haven't been tested. You may think that you're allergic to tree pollen, but it may be dozens of other things that appear at the same time of the year. If you want to know more about allergies, check out the *All About Allergies* webinar.

What are you prepared to do today?

Dr. Chet

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