Skin Prick Testing

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Introduction

Skin prick testing is performed on patients suspected of suffering from allergy. There is no age limitation for skin prick testing, this simple test is performed on both adults and children and plays an important part in the management of your allergy.

What is a skin prick test?

It is an efficient and simple method of introducing a small amount of allergen into the body and then measuring its response. An allergen is a protein molecule, for example, nut, milk or egg protein that can trigger the body’s immune system to produce antibodies and cause an allergic reaction. This method is currently considered valuable in diagnosing inhalant and food allergy.

Why do I need this test?

- To assess sensitivity to one or more allergens. Allergens are otherwise harmless substances which cause an allergic reaction.
- To confirm your clinical history of allergy.
- To help give advice on avoidance of the allergen(s) causing your allergy.

If you decide not to have the test it could make the diagnosis of your allergy more difficult as it will only be based on the information you give your doctor.

How is the test performed?

In this test sticky tape with numbers along it, is applied to the skin (usually the forearm). A drop of liquid extract of the suspected allergen is applied, along the arm opposite the numbers (figure 1). The tape is used in order that the right allergen can be identified. Positive and negative control solutions are also applied and then the drops pricked through with a sterile lancet to puncture the skin below (figure 2). If there is a positive reaction to the allergen a small lump (called a weal) will come up and reach its maximum size within 15 minutes (this weal can be red and itchy) (figure 3).
Skin prick testing

Figure 1

Figure 2

Figure 3
Control solutions

Positive and negative control solutions are used as a measure of your reaction to the allergen.

The positive solution contains histamine (a chemical released by the body during an allergic reaction) and should bring you up in a small lump, which will make you itch. If no reaction takes place it may be that something is preventing the skin from reacting. A number of drugs can do this including Antihistamines.

**You should stop taking your antihistamines 72 hrs before your test is due, unless advised to continue taking them by your doctor.**

The negative control solution contains saline (salt water). You are not expected to react to this solution. If you do respond, it may be that you have over-sensitive skin and you are reacting to the pressure that was applied. This reaction is called a ‘false positive’.

What is the lancet?

The lancet is a calibrated stylus with a 1mm point and shoulders to prevent deep penetration of the skin, ‘The test is quick and virtually painless’ (Mygind 1996).

Are there any side effects?

The amount of allergen introduced into the skin is so small that a serious reaction is very unlikely, even if you have had an anaphylactic (life threatening) reaction in the past. ‘Skin Prick testing is almost without risk’ (Malling 1993). According to the medical literature only one fatal reaction has been reported following skin prick testing (Turketaub 1989).

Important Information

Please refrain from using perfumes and moisturising lotions on the inside of the arm on the day of the test.
References and Sources of further Information


**Allergy UK**
Planwell House
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**Helpline Tel:** 01322 619898
**Website:** www.allergyuk.org
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Website: www.bda.uk.com [accessed Feb 2013]
Email: info@bda.uk.com

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