

The Bottom Line

Keep a diary to identify potential allergens

Pros and cons of getting an allergy test

Knowing what you are allergic to enables you to make appropriate lifestyle changes to avoid the discomfort or risk of having an allergic reaction, says Dr Lau Pik Onn, a senior resident physician at Icon Health Screening.

In more severe cases, one may experience anaphylaxis with symptoms such as shortness of breath, cardiac arrest, low blood pressure or rapid heartbeat, which can be life-threatening.

There are a few allergy tests available in Singapore, with the more common being a skin prick test and a blood test, says Dr Lau.

During a skin prick test, a person's skin is pricked with various allergens to check if there is raised skin, rashes or other reactions that indicate that he or she is allergic to that particular substance, she explains.

It can be used to test for conditions such as allergic rhinitis, allergic asthma, eczema, food allergies and bee venom allergy.

A blood test involves drawing blood and sending the sample to the laboratory to measure the levels of the antibody called immunoglobulin E to various allergens.

Dr Zeng Shanyong from Dr Tan & Partners Clinic says this is typically done when a person has a potentially fatal reaction to a particular allergen or to test for multiple allergens.

A common misconception is that the tests will be able to pick up all possible allergies, he says.

"This is far from the truth, as we have to select the specific allergens to be tested. And when the triggers are unknown, it can result in extensive testing with inconclusive results," he adds.

While allergy testing can improve a person's quality of life and be potentially lifesaving, there are possible downsides to it.

For those without a very clear hypersensitivity reaction, Dr Zeng says allergy testing can be confusing and expensive, running into the thousands of dollars.

"In certain patients, allergy tests can be positive, but without any symptoms after exposure to the particular allergens. This is known as sensitivity rather than an

allergy. Without a clear clinical indication, this can lead to over testing and unnecessary avoidance of allergens," he notes.

It is not necessary, says Dr Lau, to have an allergy test if you do not experience an allergic reaction or discomfort to substances in your environment.

However, if you suspect that you have an allergy and wish to better manage your lifestyle or diet, you should consider doing one, she advises.

"This is especially important if you have a more extreme reaction, such as anaphylaxis, which may result in a life-threatening situation," she adds.

Amrita Kaur

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While it is not common, it is possible to develop an allergy to a substance or food in adulthood. There is no cure for allergies, but the symptoms can be managed through treatment and by limiting one's exposure to the allergen.