

## What is it?

Allergies are an abnormal response of the immune system. People who have allergies have an immune system that reacts to a usually harmless substance in the environment. This substance (pollen, mold, and animal dander, for example) is called an allergen. Allergies are a very common problem, affecting at least two out of every 10 Americans.

## Symptoms and Risks

Sneezing, itchy, watery eyes, runny nose (clear discharge), coughing, nasal congestion, hives or other skin rash, headache and fatigue are some common symptoms of allergies. These symptoms may be mild to moderate but some allergic reactions can be severe and even life threatening.

**Skin prick test.** This test is done by placing a drop of a solution containing a possible allergen on the skin, and a series of scratches or needle pricks allows the solution to enter the skin. If the skin develops a red, raised itchy area (called a wheal), it usually means that the person is allergic to that allergen. This is called a positive reaction.

Other lab testing methods, such as radioallergosorbent testing (RAST) or an immunoassay capture test (ImmunoCAP, UniCAP, or Pharmacia CAP), may be used to provide more information.

## Treatment

Your allergy test results may show that allergy treatment is a choice for you. There are several allergy treatment options. Over-the-counter and prescription medications can ease annoying symptoms. Allergy shots also help.