

Childhood Allergic Afflictions

The inaugural I CAN! public symposium Childhood Allergies: What You Need to Know kicked off on 18 January at the Rock Auditorium, Suntec City! Focusing on three main areas of childhood allergies: food allergy, eczema and allergic rhinitis, the symposium saw over 150 participants!

For those who missed the chance to attend the symposium, we share some notes on childhood allergies, courtesy of the I CAN! team at the Children's Medical Institute, National University Hospital.

I CAN!
The Children's Asthma and Allergy Network
@ The Children's Medical Institute



Food Allergy

What is food allergy?

It is the body's immune reaction to a certain food type, producing substances which may result in an asthma attack, hives, allergic rhinitis, vomiting or stomach discomfort. The reaction usually occurs within 30 minutes and can last up to 24 hours.

What kinds of food cause this?

Bird's nest, eggs, milk, seafood, nuts and fish are some common allergy triggers.

What should I do if I think that my child has a food allergy?

If the reaction is severe and obviously linked to food, your child should see an allergist. Meanwhile, avoid the food and have medicines on standby.

Do keep a food diary to help isolate food(s) or hidden ingredients responsible for the reaction. Bring the diary along when consulting the doctor on the allergic reaction.



Will my child outgrow the food allergy?

Some children do outgrow the condition. Allergies to milk and eggs are usually outgrown but this is less so for seafood and nut allergies. Re-testing after a certain age may be recommended to confirm this.

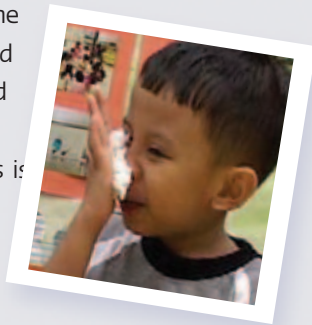
What about cold drinks and chocolates?

By definition, such foods do not cause allergy but can irritate the airways and cause one to cough. You may like to limit these in your child's diet to reduce the cough.

Allergic Rhinitis

What is allergic rhinitis?

It is a condition where one is prone to sneezing, nose congestion and sometimes, suffers from a bad cough that worsens at night. Called post-nasal drip, this is due to the secretions running from the nose to the back of the throat, causing irritation.



Why does my child have allergic rhinitis?

This could be due to a combination of genetic and environmental factors, as is the case for most allergic diseases.

What triggers allergic rhinitis?

House dust-mites are one of the most common triggers. These are microscopic creatures that are found everywhere (pillows, mattresses soft toys etc) and it is their droppings that cause allergic reactions. Other triggers are pollen, pet fur and secretions.

How do I keep allergic rhinitis in check?

Your child should take the prescribed medication and avoid environmental triggers.



What medications can my child take?

Topical steroids (nasal spray) and anti-histamines, nasal decongestants, mucolytics and antibiotics are sometimes prescribed.

How can my child avoid environmental triggers?

For dust-mite allergy:

- Wash beddings in hot water (higher than 60 °C) at least once a fortnight.
- Avoid pillows and comforters that are made of natural materials (eg. feathers) and use those made from synthetic fibres.
- Avoid using carpets and thick curtains.
- Keep your home dust-free by damp cleaning. Vacuum only when your child is not at home. Air-purifiers may also be helpful.

For pet allergy:

- Avoid contact with the pet but do consult a doctor and let your child have an allergy test.



Eczema

What is eczema?

Also known as atopic dermatitis, eczema is a non-contagious chronic condition that results in red, dry, scaly and itchy skin. It often affects the elbows, knees, neck and face and is more common in young children.

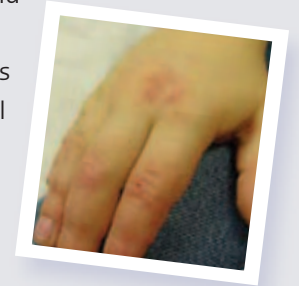
Why does my child have eczema?

This is usually due to a combination of genetic and environmental factors.

How can I keep the eczema in check?

- Moisturise as often as possible using a suitable, alcohol and scent-free moisturiser.
- Use mild soaps and pat the skin dry after showering.

- Wear fabrics suited to our local climate such as cotton.
- Avoid using detergents and harsh soaps.
- Prescriptive medication such as steroid creams, topical or oral antibiotics are sometimes used. But do note that prolonged use of steroid creams may thin the skin.



If you suspect that your child may be suffering from an allergy, the doctor may recommend some allergy tests to confirm diagnosis.

Allergy Tests

What are allergy tests?

In allergies, the body produces abnormal amounts of substance Immunoglobulin E (IgE). Allergy tests use different methods to measure the amount of IgE.

Who should be tested?

Children with persistent and difficult-to-control symptoms should be tested. This includes patients with moderate to acute asthma, eczema, rhinitis or conjunctivitis and suspected food allergy. Children with suspected allergies may also be tested.

What are the allergy tests available and how are they done?

Two types of tests can be done to confirm an allergy.

- Skin-prick test: involves placing a small amount of suspected allergen on normal skin and using a small needle to prick the skin. This test is safe and can be done on patients of all ages. Prior to this test, the child should abstain from short-acting anti-histamines (three days abstinence) and longer-acting anti-histamines (one week abstinence) before the test.
- Blood test: involves obtaining a small sample of blood and testing to see if the child is allergic to common allergens.

Which test is better?

Each test has its advantages but usually, the skin prick test is sufficient as an initial screen. However, the doctor may need both tests to make an accurate assessment of the likelihood of an allergy.



How accurate are the tests?

These tests are rather precise at eliminating substances that do not cause an allergic reaction. However, in the event that they do isolate substances that trigger an allergic reaction, this may not always be accurate. Your doctor will interpret the test(s) for your child and may order more tests if the suspicion is still high.

I CAN ! , a programme of The Children's Asthma and Allergy Network, aims to optimise the care and understanding of asthma and allergies in children. To find out more about I CAN ! , visit their website at www.ican.com.sg or call the patient hotline at 6772 5566.

