

Immunotherapy: a vaccine for allergies and asthma

If you suffer from allergic asthma, rhinitis, conjunctivitis or stinging insect allergies, allergy shots might be something you should consider. Allergy shots, also known as immunotherapy, are a form of treatment aimed at decreasing your sensitivity to allergens. Receiving allergy shots can dramatically reduce your allergy symptoms.

Immunotherapy is recommended for people with allergic asthma, rhinitis, conjunctivitis and allergies to stinging insects. Immunotherapy for food allergies is not recommended. The best option for people with food allergies is to strictly avoid that food.

Patients who receive allergen immunotherapy are injected with increasing amounts of an allergen over several months. Immunotherapy has been shown to prevent the development of new allergies and, in children, it can prevent the progression of the allergic disease from allergic rhinitis to asthma. Allergen immunotherapy can lead to the long-lasting relief of allergy symptoms after treatment is stopped.

Immunotherapy should only be given under the supervision of a physician in a facility equipped with proper staff and equipment to identify and treat adverse reactions to allergy injections. The immunotherapy shots should be given in the prescribing allergist/immunologist's office but if this is not possible, your allergist/immunologist should provide the supervising physician with comprehensive instructions about your immunotherapy treatment.

How does immunotherapy work?

Allergen immunotherapy works like a vaccine. Your body responds to the injected amounts of a particular allergen, given in gradually increasing doses, by developing an immunity or tolerance to the allergen(s). As a result, allergy symptoms can be decreased or minimized when the patient is exposed to that allergen in the future.

There generally are two phases to immunotherapy:

- **Build-up phase:** This involves receiving injections with increasing amounts of the allergens,



about 1 to 2 times per week. The length of this phase depends on how often the injections are received, but generally ranges from three to six months.

- **Maintenance phase:** This phase begins once the effective therapeutic dose is reached. The effective maintenance dose depends on the patient's level of allergen sensitivity and his or her response to the immunotherapy build-up phase. During the maintenance phase, there will be longer periods of time between immunotherapy treatments, ranging from two to four weeks. Your allergist/immunologist will decide what range is best for you.

Patients may notice decreasing symptoms during the build up phase but it may take as long as 12 months on the maintenance dose to see an improvement. The effectiveness of immunotherapy treatments appears to be related to how long the treatment lasts and the dose of the allergen.

If a patient hasn't seen improvement after a year of maintenance therapy, he or she should work with their allergist/immunologist to discuss possible reasons treatment failed and other treatment options.

If you believe immunotherapy could be beneficial to you, you should be examined by an allergist/immunologist. To find an allergist/immunologist in your area or to find additional information on allergy shots, go to www.aaaai.org, or call the AAAAI's Physician Referral and Information Line at (800) 822- 2762.

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