

Allergy Shots (Allergen Immunotherapy): Facts for Patients

Allergy shots are designed to treat the cause of your allergies. They can increase resistance to the substances you are allergic to (allergens). You may have fewer symptoms after immunotherapy. Studies show that it may prevent allergies in children. It may also lower the risk of asthma for people with allergic rhinitis.

People with moderate or severe symptoms that cannot be controlled by environmental adjustments and/or drugs may benefit from allergy shots. They are also an option for people who cannot or do not want to use only avoidance or drugs to treat their allergy symptoms.

The Process

You will receive shots of allergens that affect you, based on your allergy test results and health history. These may include environmental allergens from trees, grasses, weeds, ragweed, mold, dust mites, cats, dogs, feathers, and cockroaches. Immunotherapy does NOT include foods.

In most cases, after 6 to 12 months of weekly shots, symptoms improve. A gradual decrease in sensitivity to airborne allergens occurs and more shots lead to more improvement over time.

- About 60 to 90% improvement in symptoms is expected after the first 18 months.
- Over the next year, an additional 30 to 35% improvement in symptoms may occur.
- If there is no improvement within 24 months, then stopping immunotherapy may be considered.

There are two phases of immunotherapy:

1. **Build-up phase:** You will get shots that increase in strength. In most cases, they are given 1 or 2 times a week. The first phase lasts 3 to 6 months, depending on how often you get your shots.
2. **Maintenance phase:** This phase begins when an effective dose (also called a maintenance dose) of allergens is reached. The effective dose is based on national medical guidelines, how allergic you are to the allergens in your shot (sensitivity), and your response to the build-up phase. During the maintenance phase, you will get shots about every 4 weeks. The time between shots is different for each person. Less time between allergy shots may lead to fewer reactions and more benefit in some people, and others can go longer than 4 weeks between shots.

Length of Treatment

It is hard to predict how long immunotherapy will last. Most of the time it takes three to five years. Allergy shots should not be stopped until your symptoms are minimal or stable for one year while you are getting maintenance shots. Stopping treatment earlier may make all your symptoms return quickly.

After allergy immunotherapy is stopped, the duration of benefits varies. In some people, improvement lasts forever. For others, mild symptoms may return but can be controlled with drugs. For a few people, symptoms get worse, and more allergy shots are needed.

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Reactions to Allergy Shots

Because allergy shots contain the allergens that you are allergic to, they sometimes cause reactions. This can happen soon after a shot. You can also have a milder reaction later in the day. Most of the time, a mild reaction occurs within two hours of the shot. Severe reactions usually begin within minutes of getting the shot. If you have a reaction or feel that you have become ill because of an allergy shot, you must contact the office immediately. We will assess your condition and may change your immunotherapy schedule.

Types of reactions include:

- **Normal local reaction:** Redness, itching, and/or swelling may occur at the site of the shot. Swelling up to the size of your palm that lasts no more than 48 hours is normal. Report any other type of local swelling to the allergy staff before your next shot.
- **Local allergic reaction:** Swelling larger than the size of your palm, itching, redness, and pain may occur in some cases. If this happens, apply ice and take an over-the-counter antihistamine.
- **Systemic allergic reaction:** Rarely, a highly sensitive person may have a systemic reaction. Symptoms include itching of throat, nose, palms, and skin. Other symptoms can include hives, flushing, feeling warm, sneezing, a runny nose, coughing, wheezing, possible chest tightness, and/or asthma. In rare cases, reactions are life-threatening. If any of these symptoms occur within the first 30 minutes after your shot, tell the office staff immediately so they can evaluate you. If they occur on your way home, go to the nearest emergency facility for immediate evaluation and treatment.
- Serious systemic reactions can occur in people with asthma that is not well-controlled. Please let the allergy staff know if you feel your asthma symptoms have worsened before getting your scheduled shots. Other factors that can make severe allergic reactions more likely are intense exposure to pollen during a pollen season and exercising after a shot.
- **Delayed allergic reaction:** A bad local reaction can happen 24 hours after your shot. These reactions can be treated with an antihistamine and an ice pack on your arm to relieve the discomfort.

More Facts on Immunotherapy Safety

- In most cases, allergy immunotherapy **should not be started or escalated during pregnancy**. Please let our office know **immediately** if you get pregnant and are having immunotherapy. Maintenance therapy can continue during pregnancy in women who are not having reactions because it can help with both allergy and asthma symptoms. There is nothing to show that immunotherapy prevents allergies in newborns.
- Please let the staff know if you have been diagnosed with a new medical condition or are taking any new drugs since your last visit. If any symptoms occur after your shot, please tell the allergy staff before you get your next shot.
- You **must wait in our office for 30 minutes after each shot** in case you have a reaction.

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- Do not take part in strenuous activities 30 minutes before and 2 hours after your allergy shot.
- Do not get your allergy shot if you: are having a severe episode of hay fever or asthma without first checking with your doctor, have a bad respiratory infection with a fever over 100 degrees, or have used your rescue inhaler or nebulizer in the past 24 hours (other than as scheduled before activity).
- Do not scratch or rub your arm where the shot was given. This will cause irritation and can cause local swelling.
- If you have any questions about these instructions or your allergy symptoms, please talk to your doctor.

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