

ALLERGY, ASTHMA & SINUS CENTER P.C.

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WHAT YOU SHOULD KNOW ABOUT IMMUNOTHERAPY

WHAT IS IMMUNOTHERAPY?

Think of allergy injections or immunotherapy as "vaccinations" against allergies. However, unlike a single "shot" that you might get for tetanus or the flu, immunotherapy involves injecting you with steadily increasing amounts of the substances that cause your allergic reactions and symptoms. The whole idea of treating you with the very things that make you miserable may seem a bit odd but, in most cases, it works.

Immunotherapy has been used for over 100 years. Immunotherapy tends to be most effective against pollens, probably because there are present only during a brief period of pollination during the year. Other allergens, such as dust mites, mold spores and animal dander are likely to be encountered on a continual basis.

HOW DOES IT WORK?

Receiving regular amounts of the substances that cause your allergies actually makes you less sensitive to them. In other words, allergy injections seem to build up your resistance to the things that cause your symptoms, so the next time you run into them, they give you less trouble.

WHATS INVOLVED IN IMMUNOTHERAPY?

First you will undergo a number of tests to pinpoint the substances that cause your allergies. The results of these tests will help guide your efforts to avoid substances to which you are allergic and in the decision whether immunotherapy might help you.

Initially, you will receive injections once or twice a week. Treatment starts with a tiny amount of the substances that bother you. The dose or amount in each injection is increased until it reaches a level that can really help you. This may take four to six months to reach the effective (maintenance) dose.

The reason treatment is initiated with a small amount is because you may develop a severe reaction to an allergy injection before protection builds up. Rarely the reactions have been serious enough to cause hospitalizations and death. That's why immunotherapy is always given in a place *equipped* to handle a severe reaction quickly. That's also why you must stay for 30 minutes after each injection. Rarely does a serious reaction such as generalized itching-hives or asthma begin more than 30 minutes after injections. If this happens, you must return immediately to the injection room or proceed to nearest Emergency Room.

At each visit you will be asked about reactions such as local swelling; hives, wheezing, etc. that you may have experienced from the previous set of injections. Your report and the reactions noted by the nurse after the previous injections determine the strength of doses for subsequent injections.

Generally, allergy injections are given year-round. When you reach maintenance doses, you will need to review your progress and benefits of immunotherapy with your allergist. You will also be required to review your progress yearly with your allergy physician or if there is severe or repeated reaction to allergy injections.

If immunotherapy helps you, your physician will usually have you continue it for three to five or more years. After the initial buildup series you will receive maintenance injections about every two to four weeks. In some cases, if your symptoms return after allergy injections have been stopped, it may make sense for you to start getting them again. Fortunately, most people don't need to continue getting their injections indefinitely.

WILL MY SYMPTOMS GET BETTER

Maintenance therapy is reached when you are receiving injections of the maximum tolerated dose. This usually occurs after four to six months of injections. Most people begin to notice improvement after they have reached maintenance therapy. Be patient - it takes time to get results.

Try not to miss scheduled injections; if you do miss, the dose may need to be repeated or reduced and if more than several months pass, you may need start all over.

Although most people (about 80%) benefit from immunotherapy, keep in mind that some people do not benefit. Lack of benefit is more common when you continue to be exposed to allergens (usually pets or molds). The only way to tell if you will benefit is to try it. If significant improvement is not realized after one year, the treatment is usually stopped.

HOW MUCH DOES IT COST TO HAVE IMMUNOTHERAPY?

The costs are greatest during the first year of treatment. The first year of treatment requires making dilutions of one or more sets of individualized allergy extracts, followed by weekly injections until maintenance is achieved. Most insurance plans cover some of the cost of the solutions and the injections. You should check with your carrier so that you will know what your out-of-pocket expenses may be. The costs for the remaining years are less than for the first year for several reasons: dilutions are not needed, shots are no longer weekly, and your use of allergy and asthma medications usually decreases. It is important to check with your insurance carrier so that you will understand what your out-of-pocket expenses may be.

WHAT CAN I EXPECT FROM IMMUNOTHERAPY?

If immunotherapy is completely successful you will have few allergy symptoms. Allergy injections may not be a cure. However, they can usually improve your quality of life and reduce your need for allergy medicines to control your allergies and/or asthma.

POINTS TO REMEMBER ABOUT IMMUNOTHERAPY

Understand the risk and benefits before starting. You need to get your injection regularly for immunotherapy to work. This is a big time commitment. Be sure not to miss scheduled injections!

You may develop a severe reaction to an allergy injection. If this takes place outside of the Clinic, go to nearest Urgent or Emergency Care Department.

Immunotherapy is not a quick fix or a cure; you may need to receive it for several years. It may make your allergies or asthma better, but it probably won't make them go away entirely.

Costs vary. Talk to your insurance company about the cost before starting.