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Can Allergy Shots Help?

Allergen immunotherapy, also known as “allergy shots,” may help people who suffer from allergic asthma, rhinitis, conjunctivitis or stinging insect allergies. Immunotherapy is a form of treatment that aims to decrease sensitivity to substances called allergens. Allergens, such as pollen, mold and animal dander, are substances that trigger allergy symptoms when an allergic person is exposed to them.

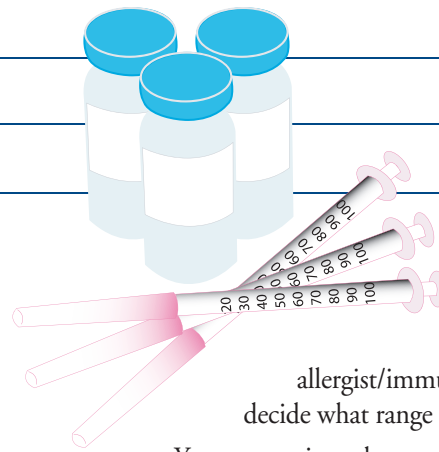
Patients who receive immunotherapy are injected with increasing amounts of an allergen over several months. Immunotherapy has proven to prevent the development of new allergies and, in children, it can prevent the progression of allergic disease from allergic rhinitis to asthma. It can also lead to the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

How Does it Work?

Immunotherapy works like a vaccine. Your body responds to the injected amounts of a particular allergen, given in gradually increasing doses, by developing immunity or tolerance to the allergen(s). As a result, allergy symptoms decrease or minimize when a patient is exposed to that allergen in the future.

There are generally two phases to immunotherapy:

- **Build-up phase:** This involves receiving injections with increasing amounts of the allergens about one to two times per week. The length of this phase depends upon how often the injections are received, but generally ranges from three to six months.
- **Maintenance phase:** This 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.

You may notice a decrease in symptoms during the build-up phase, but it may take as long as 12 months on the maintenance dose to notice an improvement. The effectiveness of immunotherapy treatments appears to be related to how long the treatment lasts, as well as the dose of the allergen. If you haven’t seen recognizable improvement after a year of maintenance therapy, work with your allergist/immunologist to discuss other treatment options.

When Can Immunotherapy be Helpful?

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

Immunotherapy should only be given under the supervision of a specialized physician in a facility equipped with proper staff and equipment to identify and treat adverse reactions to allergy injections. Ideally, immunotherapy 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.

Adverse reactions to immunotherapy are rare but do require immediate medical attention, which is why immunotherapy should be administered in a medical facility appropriately outfitted with equipment and staff capable of identifying and treating these reactions.

If you believe immunotherapy would be beneficial to you, contact an allergist/immunologist. To find an allergist/immunologist in your area or to learn more about immunotherapy, visit www.aaaai.org.

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