

PATIENT INFORMATION: ALLERGY IMMUNOTHERAPY

Did you know: 60 million people in the US suffer from allergies **and** the numbers are rising.

Allergies are reactions of the immune system to substances that, in most people, cause no symptoms. Allergies occur due to an immune response that reacts toward natural substances in the environment the same way it would react toward something harmful. The reason that the immune system reacts to a harmless substance is unknown.

Types of Allergies: Four types of allergies exist: respiratory allergy, skin-related allergy, food allergy and allergy to stinging insects.

Respiratory Allergy: The respiratory system is usually affected if a person is allergic to tree pollen, grass pollen, animals (such as pets and farm animals), molds and house dust mites. Allergic symptoms include sneezing, itching, watery eyes and nose and wheezing. Hay fever (rhinitis) and/or asthma are the most common results of respiratory allergies.

Skin-Related Allergy: Allergy to substances such as metals and fragrances and allergy to proteins such as latex affect the skin and is known as allergic eczema or contact allergy (contact dermatitis). The symptoms are usually itching, burning, reddening and blisters at the affected area. Allergic eczema most often occurs in early childhood, but also appears in older children and adults.

Food Allergy: The most common food-related allergies are cow's milk, egg proteins, soy, peanuts and fish. Eczema, diarrhea, nausea and in some cases, anaphylaxis are potential symptoms of food-related allergies.

Allergy to Stinging Insects: Hornets, wasps, yellow jackets, honey bees and in some parts of the country, fire ants, cause nearly all allergies to insects. Although many people will react to the venom of a stinging insect in some way, less than 5% of the population is truly "allergic". The most serious allergic reaction to an insect sting is anaphylaxis. Symptoms include exhaustion, dizziness, swelling of the throat, unconsciousness or cardiac arrest.

What Is Allergy Immunotherapy (IT)? Allergy immunotherapy (allergy shots) is a clinically documented treatment that considerably reduces or completely removes your allergy symptoms and the need for traditional, symptom-relieving medication. After three to six months, your need for drugs may decrease and your symptoms may become less severe. An additional effect of allergy shots is that it may prevent the onset of other allergies and the development of asthma. Also, the treatment has a long-standing effect after it is discontinued. New scientific studies have shown that results are maintained for 5-10 years after the course of allergy shots has been completed. Among the wide variety of treatment possibilities available today, allergy immunotherapy is the only treatment that targets the cause of allergy and alters the natural course of the disease, which for many patients may lead to an improved quality of life.

How Is IT Performed? The process of IT begins with the injection of a weak concentration of an allergen extract. Injections of increasingly stronger concentrations are given until the patient reaches the top or “maintenance dose”. The rate at which the concentration is increased depends on the patients’ degree of sensitivity. Most patients are treated for 3-5 years, sometimes longer. Drastic improvements in allergic symptoms can usually be seen within the first few months of treatment.

Effectiveness of IT: IT is the only treatment to address the underlying cause of allergy. Many clinical studies have shown that 80-90% of patients’ allergies improve and that the treatment remains effective for at least 6 years after IT is discontinued.

Indications for IT: IT is usually indicated in those patients where: (1) Symptoms are moderate to severe and occur more than 2-3 months each year; (2) Symptomatic medications have been unsuccessful; (3) Patient prefers IT over long-term drug treatment; (4) Allergens are not easily avoided; (5) The possibility exists to prevent more severe allergies or asthma.

Possible Side-Effects of IT: Although IT has been proven to be highly effective in treating the underlying cause of allergies, patient on IT may experience side effects. Some individuals may experience itching and redness at the site of injection, while others may experience local swelling and soreness 8-12 hours after injection. Although these local reactions may produce discomfort, they are not serious. Serious systemic reactions can occur, but they are rare.

Learn More About IT: Consult an Allergy Specialist. If you experience allergic symptoms, it is important to talk to a doctor who specializes in the diagnosis and treatment of allergic diseases. Based on your history and specific testing, your Allergy Specialist will be able to determine if you are a candidate for IT.

Warnings and Indications for Allergy Immunotherapy (IT): Hyposensitization therapy is a treatment for patients exhibiting allergic reactions to seasonal pollens, dust mites, animal dander and various other inhalants in situations where the offending allergen cannot be avoided. Prior to initiation of therapy, the clinical sensitivity should be established by careful evaluation of the patient’s history confirmed by diagnostic skin testing. Hyposensitization should not be prescribed for sensitivities to allergens, which can easily be avoided. As with all allergenic extracts, severe system reactions may occur. In certain individuals, these life-threatening reactions may be fatal.

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