



Immunotherapy- What Is It?

Immunotherapy, commonly referred to as “allergy shots” is a program designed to desensitize you to those substances to which you are allergic. Sterile extracts have been prepared from allergy-producing substances such as pollens, mold spores, house dust, and animal danders. These biological substances are injected in increasingly stronger doses on a regular schedule (usually once weekly) until your maximum dose has been achieved.

Your allergy tests results are used to create the mixture of substances to which you are allergic. This formula is custom made according to the things to which you are allergic, and the level of sensitivity you have to each one of these substances.

Immunotherapy is often used in addition to environment controls and allergy medications to eliminate your allergy symptoms. It is most effective for those allergies caused by substances you inhale such as pollens, mold spores, house dust, and animal danders.

How Immunotherapy Works

Allergies to substances you inhale are caused by your body producing excessive antibodies (IgE antibodies) toward these substances when you are exposed to them. When you are re-exposed to these substances, you experience allergic symptoms. Immunotherapy is designed to block your body's production of allergy antibodies and stimulate production of protective antibodies, thereby eliminating your allergy symptoms.

Small dilute doses are necessary at the beginning in order to allow your immune system to build tolerance to the shots over a period of time. As the doses are increased at regular intervals, you should become less sensitive to the substances that cause you allergy symptoms. The dose that provided you with the most

symptom relief, of the maximum dose you can tolerate without reaction, will become your maintenance dose and you will continue to receive this maintenance dose at regular intervals. Your maintenance dose is dependent on how well you tolerate the shots, which in turn can be dependent on how much pollen, mold, or other allergy producing substances are in the air you are breathing.

Sometimes a patient has to be held at a lesser dose until the allergy season passes, then doses can be increased to provide protection for the next allergy season. Occasionally a maintenance dose must be decreased during the allergy season as the additional “allergic load” is too much for some people to tolerate along with their shot at full dosage levels. As you have probably concluded, immunotherapy is an individually tailored program designed to combat your specific allergies.

What to Expect From Allergy Shots

In most patients, as the strength of the treatment dose increases, they will experience relief of symptoms after the injection and eventually the majority of their symptoms should be controlled from shot to shot. Many times this symptom relief is gradual as opposed to being dramatic and patients fail to realize how much the shots are helping them. Symptom relief may wear off before you get your next injection, and in this case, your doctor may choose to shorten the interval between injections. For example, if the effects of the shot wear off by the 5th day, your doctor can elect to give your shot at 5 day intervals. Likewise, the interval between shots can be lengthened if you determine relief does not wear off between shots. It is important that you note the effect of each shot and report your response at the time you get your next shot.





There are some situations where your shots may have to be temporarily discontinued such as infection, high stress, or other medical problems that are not being controlled. If you are off your shot for 30 days or more, it will be necessary to reduce the dosage and “build up” again over a short period of time.

Possible Side Effects

Your shots will probably have a slight sting that subsides quickly. A small local reaction at the injection site consisting of redness and swelling is not unusual. A local reaction greater than 2 inches in diameter or persisting for more than 48 hours is an indication to adjust your next dose. An increase in symptoms the first day after receiving your injection can also be an indication to adjust your treatment dose or to use medications to control these symptoms.

In rare cases, patients experience increased allergy symptoms shortly after receiving their injection. If this should happen to you, return to the doctor’s office immediately.

Since allergy shots are made from common biological sources, it is considered safe to administer these shots during pregnancy.

How Long You Have to Take Shots

Most patients stay on immunotherapy for three to five years. Younger patients stand a better chance of discontinuing the shots than do older patients. The rule of thumb is to stay on the shots until your symptoms have been controlled or minimized for two consecutive allergy seasons. When this point has been reached, you can consider discontinuing the shots. Your doctor or the doctor’s staff can help you with this decision and may advise you to taper off or continue injections at 10-21 day intervals. If your symptoms recur during this lengthened interval, you

are not ready to discontinue the injections.

Remember, if you are off the shots for more than 30 days, the doctor’s staff will have to determine a safe dose at which to restart your therapy.

Summary of Immunotherapy

Immunotherapy is the only specific treatment for allergy; all other treatments are directed at relieving allergy symptoms rather than stimulating the immune system as immunotherapy does. Literally hundreds of millions of allergy shots have been given over the 100 years this technique has been in use, and this method of treating allergies has been highly successful for a great number of people. There is no true “cure” for allergies but immunotherapy can have a very beneficial effect on the health of an allergic person.

Allergies develop over a period of time by repetitive exposure to allergy-producing substances. Immunotherapy is a long-term program that utilizes the body’s response to counteract the production of allergic symptoms. If you follow your doctor’s instructions carefully and take your shots on a regular schedule, your general health and quality of life can be greatly improved.

