

MEDfacts

An Educational Health Series From National Jewish Health®



Immunotherapy (Allergy Shots)

Immunotherapy (commonly called allergy shots) is a form of treatment to reduce your allergic reaction to allergens. Allergens are substances to which you are allergic. Research has shown that allergy shots can reduce symptoms of allergic rhinitis (hay fever) and allergic asthma. Remember, not all asthma is due to allergies. Research has shown allergy shots can reduce symptoms of:

- Allergic rhinitis (hay fever),
- Allergic asthma,
- Dust mite allergy,
- Animal dander allergy and
- Insect sting allergy.

Allergy shots are less effective against molds and are not a useful method for the treatment of food allergy..

Immunotherapy consists of a series of injections (shots) with a solution containing the allergens that cause your symptoms. Treatment usually begins with a weak solution given once or twice a week. The strength of the solution is gradually increased with each dose. Once the strongest dosage is reached, the injections are often given once a month to control your symptoms. At this point, you have decreased your sensitivity to the allergens. You have reached your maintenance level. Allergy shots should always be given at your health care provider's office.

When Is Immunotherapy Recommended?

If you are thinking of allergy shots, ask your health care provider about a referral to a board certified allergist. A board certified allergist will follow a number of steps to evaluate if allergy shots are right for you.

First, the allergist will ask you questions about your environment and symptoms. This will help determine if skin testing is needed. Prick skin testing may be done. This will help identify the specific

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allergens that are causing your symptoms. Skin testing should only be done under the supervision of a board certified allergist.

Once an allergy has been identified, the next step is to decrease or eliminate exposure to the allergen. This is called environmental control. Evidence shows that allergy and asthma symptoms may improve over time, if the recommended environmental control changes are made. For example, removing furry or feathered pets or following control measures for house dust mites and cockroaches may decrease symptoms. Preventing your contact with grasses, weeds and tree pollen may be more difficult. Closing outside doors and windows and using air conditioning decreases exposure in the home.

Next, your health care provider may recommend medication. Antihistamines and nasal medications may be recommended. Allergy shots may be recommended for people with severe allergic rhinitis. They may also be recommended for people with allergic asthma when the allergen cannot be avoided. Allergy shots should be prescribed only by a board certified allergist.

How Long are Allergy Shots Given?

Six months to a year of allergy shots may be required before you notice any improvement in symptoms. If your symptoms do not improve after this time, ask your allergist to review your overall treatment program. If the treatment is effective, the shots often continue three to five years, until the person is symptom-free or until symptoms can be controlled with mild medications for one year. In general, allergy shots should be stopped if they are not effective within two to three years.

Rush Immunotherapy

Rush immunotherapy is a series of allergy shots. They are given over 2 – 3 days in a row. This "rushes" the initial phase of the treatment. Increasing doses of allergen extract are given every 30 minutes to hourly instead of every few days or weeks. There is an increased risk of a reaction with this procedure. Therefore, rush immunotherapy should only be done in a hospital or high risk procedure area under very close supervision.

Other Therapies

There are a number of alternative treatments which claim to "cure" allergies. These methods are **not** supported by scientific studies. They are **not** approved by the American Academy of Allergy and Immunology. Unapproved alternative treatments include:

- High-dose vitamin and mineral therapy;
- Urine injections;
- Bacterial vaccines;
- Exotic diets.

It is easy to feel overwhelmed or confused by the many different methods of allergy testing and treatment. We encourage you to work with a board certified allergist to evaluate and determine what is appropriate for you.

Note: This information is provided to you as an educational service of National Jewish Health. It is not meant to be a substitute for consulting with your own physician.

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