

Immunotherapy

What Is Immunotherapy?

Allergy immunotherapy, or “allergy shots,” is a process that changes the body’s immune system and reduces an overreaction to normally harmless substances or allergens. The therapy decreases symptoms when patients are exposed to offending allergens (pollens, dust mites, mold, animal dander). Immunotherapy exposes individuals to a series of weak allergens with increased doses over time so that patients have fewer symptoms when exposed to substances to which they are allergic.

What Are Common Allergens?

Common environmental allergens are grass, pollens, trees, weeds, mold, dust mites, cockroaches, and cat/dog hair. Some can give you seasonal symptoms, while others can affect you year-round.

How Does Immunotherapy Work?

Allergy shots are usually started at a very low dose. This dose is gradually increased (“escalation phase”) until the therapeutic dose (“maintenance phase”) is achieved. Injections are typically given once or twice per week in the escalation phase. It usually takes about 3 to 6 months to reach maintenance phase. Most patients remain on treatment for 3 to 5 years. Improvement in symptoms is not immediate and can take 6 to 12 months before any relief in symptoms is noted.

There are also other immunotherapy options in addition to allergy shots, including allergy tablets or drops that are placed under the tongue. These other options can be discussed with a physician.

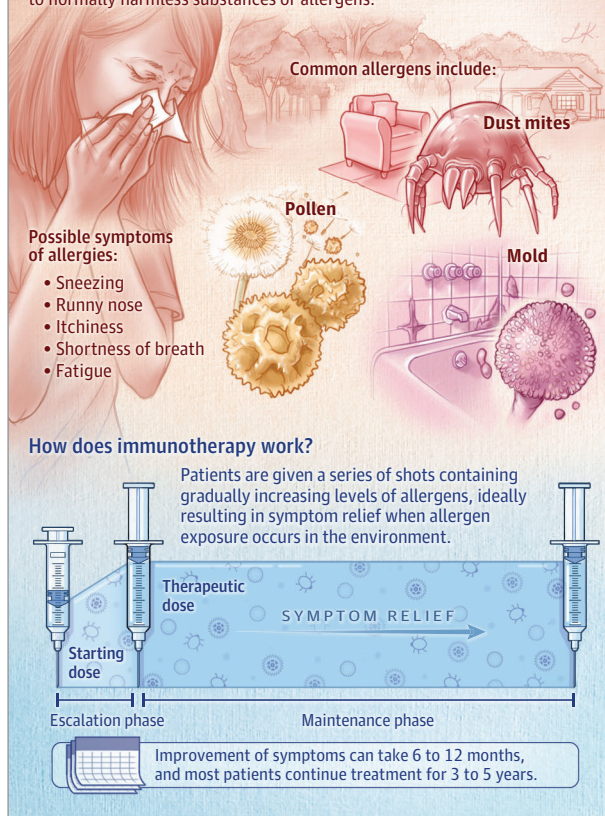
Who Can Benefit?

Those with documented allergy symptoms to substances in their environment may benefit from this therapy. Symptoms include sneezing, runny nose, itching, shortness of breath, and fatigue. Documentation of allergy can be in the form of a positive skin or blood test. Avoiding allergens and medical treatment (ie, nasal sprays) are usually tried first because immunotherapy can be a big time commitment.

Are There Risks?

As with any treatment, there are risks to immunotherapy. Risks are present because patients are exposed to substances to which they are allergic. The most common risk is a local reaction or swelling/redness/itchiness around the site of the injection, which usually goes away as the treatment continues. Whole-body reactions are also possible but much less common; however, they are potentially life threatening and need to be taken very seriously. The most serious risk is

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anaphylaxis, which is characterized by breathing issues, low blood pressure, unconsciousness, and possibly even death. Reactions can be unpredictable and require immediate evaluation and medical care.

Is Immunotherapy Right for Me?

This will depend on what you are allergic to, your symptoms, and your personal circumstances. You should speak with your physician regarding your options.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

American Academy of Otolaryngic Allergy
<https://aaoodallergy.org/patient-resources/>

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