

Would I Benefit From Allergy Shots?

By RICHARD F. LOCKEY, M.D., Tribune Correspondent

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If you suffer from asthma caused by allergies, hay fever, allergic eye problems or allergic reactions to stinging insects, you may benefit from allergy shots, also called immunotherapy. This therapy is intended to gradually decrease sensitivity to the substances, or allergens, that trigger your symptoms, including pollens, dust mites, mould and animal dander. The shots are usually prescribed for patients with severe allergies who do not want to be on medications, or for those whose symptoms are not alleviated by medications.

Allergy shots are the treatment of choice for allergies to insect stings. They are recommended for those who suffer systemic symptoms, especially respiratory problems and decreased blood pressure, following a sting. Immunotherapy has not been proven effective for hives or food allergies.

Studies have shown that immunotherapy decreases the development of new allergies and prevents the progression of hay fever to asthma in children.

Allergen immunotherapy is a form of vaccination. The shots contain a very small amount of the allergen or allergens that trigger your disease. For example, if you are allergic only to cats, immunotherapy is prescribed for cat dander allergy only. However, if you are allergic to tree, grass and weed pollens, a combination vaccine is prescribed. Over time, the doses of allergen injected are gradually increased so your body can develop an immunity or tolerance to it. If the treatment goes well, your allergic reactions will become milder or may even go away.

Health care professionals administering the injections screen patients beforehand to rule out any exacerbations of asthma or severe respiratory tract infections. They make sure patients have not recently started any new medications that might interfere with treatment of a reaction to the allergy shots. Exercise within several hours of an injection is not recommended because of its potential to increase absorption of the allergen from the injection site and induce an adverse reaction.

The therapy begins with a build-up phase, during which injections are administered in the upper arm once or twice weekly, until you reach the maximum dose. Eventually the shots are reduced to once a month. This maintenance regimen lasts three to five years, but may continue longer, particularly for the treatment of insect sting allergies.

The longer the injections are administered, the more effective this type of treatment remains after it is discontinued. Improvement is usually noticed by the time the patient reaches the optimal allergen dosage — typically within three to six months.

The most common side effects of allergy shots are redness and swelling at the site of injection. Although rare, reactions can be serious — and even life-threatening if anaphylactic shock results. For this reason, injections should be supervised by a specialist in allergy and immunology at a facility equipped and staffed to identify and treat potentially severe reactions.

Patients are typically monitored for 30 minutes after the injections to assure they don't develop side effects such as shortness of breath, runny nose or a tight throat. If allergy shots are received outside the allergist/immunologist office, comprehensive instructions are needed for the health care professional administering the injections.

For information about allergen immunotherapy, visit Allergy Canada Ltd at www.allergycanada.com