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When is it time to consider allergy shots?

Though not a cure, allergy shots can significantly reduce allergy symptoms in some people who aren't able to avoid allergens and who do not respond well to other medications.

Immunotherapy (commonly called allergy shots) is a form of treatment to reduce your allergic reaction to allergens. Research has shown that allergy shots can reduce symptoms of allergic rhinitis (hay fever) and allergic asthma. Allergy shots can be effective against grass, weed and tree pollens, house and dust mites, cat and dog dander and insect stings. 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 with a solution containing allergens that cause your symptoms. Treatment usually begins with a weak solution given once or twice a week. The strengths 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 are usually given at your healthcare provider's office.

When is immunotherapy recommended?

Allergy testing should be considered if symptoms are year round and not controlled by simpler methods. Complications of allergy, including nasal polyps or sinusitis may be a reason for taking the next step.

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 help identify the specific allergies that are causing your symptoms. When you have prick skin testing done, a small amount of each substance to which you may be allergic is placed on the skin (on your arm or back), the skin is then pricked. If you're allergic to an allergen, you will get a bump and redness where the skin is pricked. After a short time, each skin test reaction is measured for swelling and redness. A large enough skin reaction is a positive skin test. This means that allergy may exist to the allergen placed at that site. The allergist will compare your prick skin test results with your history of symptoms.

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 physician may recommend medication. Antihistamines and nasal medications may be recommended. Allergy shots may be recommended for people for severe allergic rhinitis. They may also be recommended for people with allergic asthma when the allergen cannot be avoided.

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 doctor to review your overall treatment program. If the treatment is effective, the shots often continue three to five years until you are 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.

Are there other therapies?

There are a number of alternative treatments that claim to cure allergies. These methods are not supported by scientific studies. They're not approved by the American Academy of Allergy, Asthma and Immunology. Unapproved alternative treatments include high-dose vitamin and mineral therapy, urine injections, bacterial vaccines, and exotic diets.