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Immunotherapy (Allergy Shots)

1. What is it?

Immunotherapy (also known as allergy shots) is a form of treatment for allergies. It has been shown to be effective for allergies, allergic asthma and insect sting allergy. It is not an effective measure for the treatment of food allergies.

2. Who gets it?

Patients with allergies or asthma may be candidates for allergy shots. An allergist can evaluate you with a series of tests including skin and/or blood tests. These will help identify the specific allergens that are causing your symptoms. Treatment of allergies involves three steps - environmental control (removing a pet or following control measures for dust mites), medications (nasal sprays, antihistamines) and allergy shots.

3. How do they work?

Allergy injections contain the allergens that you are allergic to. They work similar to a vaccine by building up part of immune system that fights allergies - hence they are sometimes referred to as 'allergen vaccine'. Building up the immune system takes time. Therefore you would not see an immediate effect after you start the shots. It may take 6-12 months before you see any effect.

4. How long are they given?

If the shots are working, they are continued for 3-5 years and longer if that is the treatment that most effectively controls the symptoms. On general, allergy shots should be stopped if they are not effective within 2-3 years.

5. What is the shot schedule like?

Allergy shots consist of a series of injections given once or twice a week for 6-12 months - buildup phase and then every 2-4 weeks - maintenance phase for 3-5 years. The injections should be administered only in a physician's office in view of potential adverse effects.

6. Are there any side effects?

As you are getting something you are allergic to, there is always potential for adverse events with allergy shots. The reactions can be local or systemic. Local reactions are common and include swelling and redness at the site of injection. Systemic reactions are rare and include hives, throat swelling and fall in blood pressure – also known as anaphylaxis.

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