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Finding relief: Immunotherapy can change your life

Does it seem like your allergy symptoms never stop bothering you? Your life is constantly being disrupted by your runny nose, those itchy, watery eyes and the wheezing that just never seems to go away. But alas, there is relief in sight! A technique called “immunotherapy” or “allergy shots” can help alleviate symptoms caused by allergies. By participating in and completing an immunotherapy program, you can dramatically reduce your allergy symptoms.

How immunotherapy works

Immunotherapy is an effective vaccination program that can increase your immunity to substances called allergens. Allergens are what trigger symptoms. The program begins by giving injections of gradually increasing amounts of an allergen to a patient over several months. Allergen immunotherapy works like a vaccination. Through your body’s exposure to small, injected amounts of a particular allergen, in gradually increasing doses, your body builds up immunity to the allergen(s) to which you are allergic. This means that when you encounter these allergens in the future, you will have a reduced or very minor allergic response and fewer symptoms. If you begin allergen immunotherapy treatment, it is very important to continue your injections on a regular basis until the treatment is completed. Otherwise, the treatment will not be beneficial. Generally, patients receive injections for three to five years or longer. After that, their sensitivity to the particular allergen is reduced, often for years following discontinuation of therapy.

Benefits of immunotherapy

Allergen immunotherapy treatment is considered when allergy symptoms are moderate to severe, occur throughout most of the year, do not respond adequately to medications, and are triggered by allergens that are not easily avoided, such as pollens or house dust mites. Patients with “unavoidable” allergens, such as grass or ragweed, may experience the intolerable symptoms such as sneezing, runny nose, itchy and red eyes during the spring and fall. It is impossible, or impractical, for the patient to completely avoid these common, airborne allergens. Although some steps can be taken to relieve symptoms, such as medications and staying indoors, they are only temporary and will not alleviate the condition year round.

The initial treatment is very frequent, resulting in many trips to the allergist/immunologist office. In addition to this, you will be required to stay in the office for 30 minutes after your injections. This is purely for your safety, as the physician will want you there in case of an adverse reaction to the shot. Some patients also develop swelling at the site of injection. These “local reactions” can be resolved with oral antihistamines, ice packs or an adjustment of the dose given. The positive side of immunotherapy outweighs the time involved in most cases. For some individuals, immunotherapy can provide relief and a way of life that would never have been possible previously. If you believe immunotherapy could be beneficial to you, you should be examined by an allergist/immunologist.

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