ALLERGY SHOTS - WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW

What are allergy shots?
Allergy shots contain small amounts of the things that you are allergic to. These things are called allergens (or antigens). The dose of allergen starts very low and is slowly increased over many weeks. The goal is to increase your immunity (resistance) to the allergens, and to reduce your allergy symptoms. When this happens, you can take less allergy medicine.

Who benefits from allergy shots?
Allergy shots may help you if you have problems with allergies, such as:

- Itchy, runny, or stuffy nose (allergic rhinitis)
- Itchy, watery, or red eyes (allergic conjunctivitis)
- A life-threatening reaction to insect stings

How long will I need to get shots?
You may have fewer symptoms in the first months of treatment. Symptoms should continue to improve as you continue maintenance injections. You should continue to get shots for three to five years. It takes this long to achieve lasting immunity.

What risks are there with allergy shots?
You may have redness, swelling, or pain at the site of the shot. These symptoms usually start 20 to 30 minutes after the shot and may not go away until the next day.

To make you feel better, put an ice pack on the shot site and take an antihistamine, like diphenhydramine (Benadryl is one brand name). Sometimes, the amount of your next dose will need to be changed.

If you have a reaction that is bigger than one and a half inches wide, you should tell your doctor. A reaction that last longer than 24 hours also should be reported to the doctor.

Life-threatening reactions are rare. These are serious reactions:

- Sudden itching of the nose, eyes, throat, ears, or skin
- Shortness of breath or sneezing
- A lightheaded or dizzy feeling
- Tightness in the chest
- Hives or itchy palms

Why is there a waiting period after my shot?
Serious reactions most often occur within 20-30 minutes after the shot. Any serious symptoms should be reported right away. The office where you get your shots can treat these reactions. The treatment will include a shot of epinephrine and an antihistamine. More treatment may be needed.
What can I do to help stop a reaction?
At each visit, tell the nurse any new information before you get the shot.

- Report anything that happened after your last shot.
- Report any new medicines you are taking.
  - Especially blood pressure medicines like Beta-blockers (Atenolol is one brand name)
  - Beta-blocker eye drops are sometimes prescribed and these should be stopped as well.
- Report any new medical problems or illnesses.
- Report any flares of your allergies.
- Report any flares of your asthma.
- Report if you are pregnant.

Exercise increases your chance of having a serious reaction. You should not exercise for one hour before your shot and two hours after your shot.

What are the benefits of allergy shots?

- You might be cured of your allergies.
- You may need less allergy medicine.
- You may be sick less often and miss less work or school because of illness.
- You may feel better in general.
- The shots may stop children from getting other allergies.
- The shots may stop children with allergies from getting asthma.

What is the difference between Traditional and Cluster Immunotherapy?
The main reason patients do not get to their maintenance dose is because of the time commitment associated with a six month “build-up phase” in traditional immunotherapy. Cluster Immunotherapy protocols were developed to accommodate patients with regard to this issue. Both Traditional and Cluster Immunotherapy give doses of your allergen by injection on a weekly basis. Both protocols require approximately 22 injections to get to maintenance phase. However, with Cluster Immunotherapy it is possible to get to “maintenance phase” in 9 clinic visits. This is achieved by giving patients a “cluster” of 2-3 injections each visit during the “build-up phase”.

What is Cluster Immunotherapy?
Cluster immunotherapy is another form of immunotherapy that your physician might decide would be best for you and your circumstances. Cluster (or accelerated) immunotherapy will help you reach your maintenance dose much quicker than traditional immunotherapy. The cluster protocol calls for 2-3 injections from each antigen mix. The shots are given 30 minutes apart and can be given twice a week with at least 2 days between each series of injections.

Is there greater risk with Cluster Immunotherapy?
The incidence of systemic reactions with cluster protocol is slightly higher than traditional immunotherapy, but we take a few more precautions. We require all patients getting cluster immunotherapy to take an antihistamine (Allegra, Zyrtec, Clarinex, or Claritin) and either Singulair or Accolate, the evening prior to or up to two hours before the office visit. They will also be required to bring an auto-injector epinephrine (Auvi-Q or EpiPen) to clinic when they get their shots.

What is the Traditional Immunotherapy schedule for the shots?
Your doctor will decide the number of shots you will need. For the first six months, you will usually get shots once a week. During this time, the dose of allergen is a little bigger each week. If more than 7 to 10 days have gone by since your last shot, the doctor cannot increase your dose. So, it is important not to miss any shots. Sometimes the build-up phase takes longer than six months.

Once you have reached your highest dose, you will be in the “maintenance phase”. In this phase, you will get shots every two to four weeks.

**When you receive your “shots”:**

- **Do not take** your allergy shot if you are having an acute, severe episode of hay fever or asthma, or if you have an acute respiratory infection with fever over 100 degrees.
- **You must** wait in the office for at least 30 minutes after each injection.
- **Do not scratch** or rub arm where the injection was given. This will irritate the area and cause local swelling. If arm continues to itch or become sore an ice pack may be placed on the local area and take an antihistamine.
- **Always** have extra antihistamine (Benadryl, Allegra, and Zyrtec are some brand names) on hand.

*You will need to schedule an appointment for your first allergy shot and one for your first maintenance shot, as well as routine yearly exams with one of the doctors or physician assistants.*

**Questions to ask your insurance company prior to starting Immunotherapy:**

How much will my insurance pay for the antigen used for the injection?

- CPT Code 95165

How much will my insurance company pay when I receive traditional immunotherapy?

- One injection CPT code 95115
- Two or more injections CPT code 95117

How much will my insurance company pay when I receive cluster immunotherapy, which includes a doctor visit with the injections?

- Cluster injection CPT code 95180
- Doctor Visit depending on the circumstance will be one of the following CPT codes
  - 99213
  - 99214
  - 99215