

# The Allergy & Asthma Clinic

[www.TheAllergyClinic.com](http://www.TheAllergyClinic.com)

Andrew C. Engler, M.D.

290 Baldwin Avenue, San Mateo, California 94401

(650) 343-4597 FAX (650) 343-3402

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## A Review of Immunotherapy or Allergy Shots

When avoidance and medication fail to give adequate relief, immunotherapy is often the best option to address the underlying allergy. The concept is simple: By slowly introducing the patient's immune system to small, controlled amounts of specific allergens they are allergic to, we can "teach" the body to become tolerant of these substance so that they are less offensive to it in the future. When an adequate level of tolerance has been achieved, the substance will be less aggravating to the immune system and thus exposure to them in the future will cause much fewer symptoms. Immunotherapy, administered as allergy shots or drops, treats the cause of the underlying allergies and provides longer, lasting relief.

## How Immunotherapy Works

Immunotherapy is a gradual, steady process. It "teaches" the immune system a better way to work. Immunotherapy builds up your protective immunity and allows your immune system to operate more effectively. While not everyone's allergies can be "100% cured", there is overwhelming evidence to show that most people can reduce their sensitivity to allergens. Usually, your allergies can be controlled to a point where you feel much better, and less medication is needed to treat your symptoms.

Let's face it, some hate getting shots, especially young children, but contrary to what people believe, allergy shots are much less painful, as compared to getting an intramuscular vaccination, such as a flu shot or COVID vaccine. If administered correctly, and proper immunotherapy guidelines are followed, the risk of a reaction is low, but on very rare occasions, some still experience an adverse event requiring medical attention. It takes time to retrain your immune system. An immunotherapy regimen focuses on getting your protective

immunity "built up" with a steady, consistent and safe schedule of injections. For most patients, immunotherapy injections are initially given once or twice a week. When you begin immunotherapy, the allergic substance, or allergen, is slowly reintroduced to your immune system. This is called the "Build-Up" phase. The allergen is in such a small amount that it should not trigger an adverse reaction. Assuming that there has not been a significant reaction to the previous injection, the dose is gradually increased.

Immunotherapy vaccines are prepared in our office based on the patient's individual allergic condition, symptom history and allergy test results. Most patients reach their maintenance dose in less than 12 months, but in the recent years, some patients have elected to pursue accelerated dosing schedules, allowing them to reach their maintenance dose sooner, usually in several months. One such dosing schedule is called Cluster Immunotherapy. Once the "maintenance dose" is reached and the patient's allergy symptoms are under better control, injections can be given less frequently. For many, the need to take medications is significantly decreased. Many people experience lasting relief from allergy symptoms after being treated with immunotherapy. Most patients are on immunotherapy for an average of about 5 years.

## Injection Immunotherapy vs. Sublingual Immunotherapy

Although injection immunotherapy is considered to be the "gold standard" in the treatment of allergies here in the United States, sublingual immunotherapy is also considered to be a viable option for the treatment of allergic rhinitis. Like injection immunotherapy, sublingual immunotherapy focuses on treating the underlying allergy by gradually desensitizing patients to specific allergens. Sublingual immunotherapy involves placing the allergen under the tongue in controlled amounts, typically over a period of several years, in an effort to increase immunologic tolerance and diminish sensitivity to the allergen. In a publication by John Hopkins, a scientific review of 63 published studies affirm that sublingual immunotherapy is a safe and effective alternative to immunotherapy injections. Patients take the drops in the convenience of their own homes instead of going to a doctor's every week for shots.

If you have questions regarding whether immunotherapy is a good option for you, please give us a call. As always, we are here to help you get your allergies under the best optimal control.