

Allergy Shots—What You Need to Know

What are allergy shots?

Allergy shots have small amounts of the things that you are allergic to. These things are called allergens. The first dose of allergen starts very low and is slowly increased over many weeks. The goal is to increase your immunity (resistance) to the allergens. This will also reduce your allergy symptoms. When this happens, you will need less allergy medicine.

Who benefits from allergy shots?

Allergy shots may help you if you have allergy problems such as:

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

What is the schedule for the shots?

Your doctor will decide the number of shots you will need. In the first six months, you will get shots twice a week. The dose of allergen will get bigger each week. It is important not to miss any shots. If you miss getting your shot for more than seven to ten days, your doctor cannot increase your dose. Sometimes the build-up phase takes longer than six months. Once you have reached your highest dose, you will be in “maintenance phase”. In this phase, you will get shots every two to four weeks.

How long will I need to get shots?

You may have fewer symptoms in the first six months of treatment. You should start having fewer symptoms after being on a maintenance dose for one to two years. You will continue to get shots for three to five years. It takes this long to protect you from allergens.

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 and may not go away until the next day.

To make you feel better, put an ice pack on the shot site. You may want take Benadryl (antihistamine). Sometimes, the amount of your next dose will need to be changed

If you have a reaction that is bigger than 1-1/2 inches wide, you should tell your doctor. A reaction that lasts longer than 24 hours also should be reported to the doctor.

Life-threatening reactions are rare. Symptoms include:

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

Serious reactions can occur 30 minutes after the shot. This is why you will be asked to wait in the hospital 30 minutes after your shot. The medical staff where you get your shot knows how to treat these reactions if they happen. The treatment will include a shot of adrenalin and an antihistamine. There is chance that 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
- 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 or for two hours after the 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.

Adapted from the American Academy of Family Physicians:

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