

# IMMUNOTHERAPY



allergy foundation south africa

<http://www.allergyfoundation.co.za>



- Allergies occur in people who are more sensitive than “normal” people to innocent substances in their environment.
- The substances in the environment that cause the symptoms are allergens.
- Many things in the environment can be allergens; some indoors, some outdoors and some taken in as foods or medicines.
- Allergens differ between people ... so people with allergies should have either skin or blood tests done to identify what is triggering their symptoms and they know what to avoid.
- Sometimes, however, avoiding allergens may not work or may not be feasible. If the allergy is still really troublesome despite regular treatment, allergen immunotherapy might be an option for treatment!

## WHAT IS IMMUNOTHERAPY?

- Allergen immunotherapy is when the doctor actually gives you the thing that you are allergic to every day to try to trick your body into becoming resistant to the allergy!
- This treatment needs a lot of dedication because it must be taken regularly for at least 3 years!
- Immunotherapy is the only medical treatment which may be able to actually cure allergies because once a patient has undergone a full “course” of immunotherapy, the person becomes “resistant” to that allergen and even when they come into contact with it, don’t have any symptoms.
- Allergen immunotherapy is only effective for some people and not for others ... depending on the type of allergy, the specific allergen you are sensitive to and whether you also have symptoms from more than one allergen.
- For people with hayfever, immunotherapy is available for grass pollens, tree pollens, weed pollens, house dust mite, some moulds, cat, dog and horse. This may be given as drops given under the tongue at home, or as injections by a doctor.
- For people with severe reactions to bee or wasp stings immunotherapy is available in the form of injections only.

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## TYPES OF IMMUNOTHERAPY

### Injection Immunotherapy:

- Injection Immunotherapy is given by syringe with the needle put under the patient's skin (subcutaneous).
- To start, a very small dose is given. Each injection has a higher amount and/or concentration of the allergen until a top (maintenance) dose is achieved.
- The increasing doses are usually given weekly for about 16-18 weeks. After this, the top doses can be more spread out, given 6-8 weekly.
- Injection immunotherapy must be given for at least 3 years to be fully effective, and stopping it half way or "taking a break" means that it may be less effective or not work at all.
- People having injection immunotherapy are getting the very thing to which they are allergic as an injection under the skin, so it does have a risk of both big and small side effects. Because of this, it must be given by someone with experience and after each injection the person needs to stay at the doctors clinic or office for at least half an hour to make sure no bad reactions occur.
- Injection Immunotherapy is used mostly for bee and wasp allergy, but can also be used for severe hayfever.

### Oral Immunotherapy:

- In oral immunotherapy the doctor gives you the thing that you are allergic to as a drop under your tongue (sublingual) every day to try to trick your body into becoming resistant to the allergy!
- This treatment needs a lot of dedication because the drops are taken every day for at least 2 to 3 years!
- Oral immunotherapy has much less side effects than injection immunotherapy.
- Because of this, the "top dose" is given immediately with no need to increase the doses slowly. This first dose must be given in the doctor's office to make sure it is being done properly and to look for the rare side effects. After this the drops are taken at home.
- Oral immunotherapy is often preferred for people with hayfever because it has less side effects and requires much less visits to the doctors rooms. On the other hand, because immunotherapy requires the doses to be taken really regularly, an advantage of injection immunotherapy is that the doctor knows whether doses have been given properly.



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## WHICH PATIENTS BENEFIT?

- Immunotherapy does not work in all patients with allergies.



- It is the only treatment that can cure people with bee or wasp venom allergy.
- It works best when the patient is allergic to only one allergen, rather than lots of allergens.



- It is particularly effective for people who have severe allergy to house dust mites or pollens.



- It may also be given to carefully selected patients with severe allergy to cats, dogs and horses.
- Patients with multiple allergies do not usually respond well to immunotherapy.
- Allergy tests should be performed, and people be avoiding their allergen carefully before immunotherapy is even considered.
- It is important to be carefully evaluated by a doctor experienced in treating allergies, and using immunotherapy before immunotherapy is started.



A medical specialist with a special interest and skill in allergy might be able to help. See the list of health professionals with skills in allergy on the AFSA website.