



3440 North Valdosta Road • Valdosta, Georgia 31602  
(229) 247-2211 • (229) 249-9490 Fax

**Alan J. Alvarado, M.D.**  
Board Certified Pediatrics  
Board Certified Allergy & Immunology

**Robert J. Criscuolo, M.D.**  
Board Certified Pediatrics

## Allergy and Immunotherapy Injection Q & A

### **Q: What is an allergy shot?**

A: Allergy shots are purified solutions of the very things you are allergic to. Each patient has their own custom prescription based on their allergy skin testing. For instance, if you are allergic to trees, small amounts of pollen will be in your shots.

### **Q: How do allergy shots work?**

A: Initially, allergy shots are diluted vials and will gradually increase in strength until you reach concentration vials for tolerance purposes. As your tolerance to the shots increases, so will your ability to tolerate the substances as they occur in nature. Many scientific studies have been conducted which document actual changes in the way an allergic person's immune system responds to pollens and other allergens after treatment with allergy shots. The response becomes more like that of a non-allergic person, hence the name "immunotherapy." Allergy shots treat the cause of the allergic response, which is the inappropriate development of allergy antibodies against harmless things in the environment.

### **Q: How often will I receive a shot?**

A: Allergy injections are given every 3-10 days initially while in diluted vials. Once you build up to higher concentrations, we allow 7 days between shots to minimize adverse reactions. When the maximum concentration has been reached, usually after 6-12 months, shots will be progressively spaced to 2 week, 3 week, and finally monthly maintenance shots. You may choose to come biweekly during the build-up period in order to reach maintenance doses faster, but this is not a requirement. If more than 10 days elapse between shots during the build-up period, the last dose must be repeated before continuing. Should more than one month elapse or a systemic reaction occur, your dose will be reduced appropriately and you will need to build back up before advancing.

### **Q: When will the allergy shots begin working?**

A: Apparent improvement with allergy shots usually takes 6-12 months, or upon approaching maintenance concentration. This response time is variable from person to person and depends on several factors, including the presence or absence of ongoing overwhelming allergy triggers or irritants. Patients who show no improvement after 18-24 months are usually advised not to continue. About 85-90% of people with hay fever who receive allergy shots have significant benefits, as evidenced by fewer symptoms, less medication requirement, and fewer complications like infections and asthma.

### **Q: How long will allergy shot treatment continue?**

A: Allergy shots are recommended to continue for at least 3-5 years. The best indicator to discontinue injections is after at least 2 years without symptoms.

### **Q: Will I continue to take allergy medication(s)?**

A: Before reaching maintenance vials, you should continue to take allergy medications, especially during the first 6-12 months. Allergy shots will not be effective immediately. Even after reaching maintenance, you may still require medication to control your symptoms during high allergy seasons, but your medication requirements should be less than prior to receiving shots.

### **Q: Do I continue to see the allergist?**

A: If you are a new patient or having problems, you may be asked to come for a follow-up exam 4-8 weeks after beginning allergy shots. Thereafter, you will come for follow-up visits every 6 months for an assessment of immunotherapy response and adjustment of shot schedule can be made.

**Q: Should I get an allergy shot if I am sick?**

A: Allergy shots will not be given if you are ill, especially if you have a fever or are wheezing. If the illness is related to your allergies, please call the office for advice or an appointment if you have not been seen in more than one month. Be sure the nurse is aware of any changes in your medical condition or any new medications another doctor may have prescribed.

**Q: Should pregnant women get allergy shots?**

A: Women who are receiving allergy shots and become pregnant should alert the medical staff. Continuing allergy shots during pregnancy is safe as long as they have been tolerated previously, but the strength should not be increased during pregnancy as the risk of systemic reactions is higher during the build-up period. Your doctor will want to review your allergy medications with you to be sure they are safe during pregnancy. New patients who are pregnant will not begin allergy shots until after delivery.

**Q: Are there side effects from allergy shots?**

A: Reactions can occur because you are receiving shots that include your allergic substances. Reactions are divided into 2 groups: local and systemic.

• **LOCAL REACTIONS:**

- Symptoms: redness, swelling and itchiness at injection site.

This may begin within minutes of the shot and is not dangerous. Unless the reaction is quite large, painful, or lasts more than 24 hours, no adjustment is necessary in allergy shot dose. Notify the allergy nurse if you are having a bothersome problem with local reactions.

- Treatment: Ice applied to injection site and perhaps an antihistamine.

• **SYSTEMIC REACTIONS: \*\*Rare, but possible reaction and why allergy shots must never be given outside of medical facility\*\***

- Symptoms: itchy eyes, nose, throat, scalp and body, coughing, sneezing, wheezing, shortness of breath, hives, throat tightness, nausea, dizziness, and/ or headache.

- Treatment: systemic reactions are serious and require immediate attention. If neglected, the reaction could be fatal. Antihistamines and adrenalin may be administered. If necessary, emergency equipment to stabilize respiration and circulation are available in the office.

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**Q: When would a reaction occur?**

A: More than 90% of reactions occur within the first half hour of receiving an allergy shot, although reactions may occur up to 48 hours later. For this reason, all patients must wait for at least 20 minutes following an allergy shot in our office or in an office where a physician is present so that medical attention is available.

**Q: Are reactions common?**

A: Local reactions may occur in many patients at some point in their course of therapy but are usually minor and of no consequence. Systemic reactions are rare and occur in less than 1% of all allergy shots given. Most systemic reactions are mild and easily managed.

**Q: What can I do to minimize reactions?**

1. Wait in the office for at least 20 minutes following each allergy shot.
2. Let the nurse know:
  - a. How well last shot was tolerated
  - b. About any new medications
  - c. Any wheezing, fever or illness
  - d. Pregnancy
3. Avoid strenuous exercise for one after receiving shot
4. Carry an antihistamine and if necessary a bronchodilator inhaler
5. Try to avoid allergy shots during the first few days of menstrual cycle if possible as some women experience an increased frequency of reactions during that time