

Department of Allergy

Information for patients undergoing desensitisation

Desensitisation (or immunotherapy) is a highly effective treatment for allergies such as pollen hay fever, dust mite rhinitis and in unusual situations to some household pets. The effect of the treatment is to reduce your allergy and requirements for additional anti-allergy medication. Desensitisation is only considered if all other treatments are shown to have been ineffective. It must not be considered as a first-line treatment because of the risks involved.

Procedure

Desensitisation involves regular injections under the skin of your arm. Increasing amounts of an extract of the substance to which you are allergic are given weekly for approximately three months or until the top dose is achieved. This is followed by monthly injections at the top dose for a further three years.

Before each injection, you will have your pulse, blood pressure and peak flow (peak flow is a respiratory test) measured by the nurse. The doctor will then ask you questions about your general health and whether you developed an allergic reaction with any previous injections. After you have been injected it is necessary to remain in the Clinic under observation for one hour. During this period, you will have further measurements of your pulse, blood pressure and peak flow. At intervals during the three year desensitisation period you will be asked to have a blood test.

Side effects

The injection site may become slightly swollen and itchy for up to two to three days but these reactions generally improve once the top dose is reached. Some patients develop tiredness for up to 24 hours after the injection especially during the first three months. Occasionally, more serious reactions can occur such as a generalised itchy rash, asthma, itchy eyes or nasal symptoms. All these are readily treatable.

Severe allergic reactions

Sometimes, a severe allergic reaction can occur soon after the injection and will be treated quickly by the clinic doctor. Severe allergic reactions are the reason why it is necessary to have this form of treatment in a specialised Allergy Clinic run by staff that are highly trained in the treatment of allergy.

Effectiveness of desensitisation

Allergen desensitisation is highly effective and the majority of patients will benefit. However, long-term improvement is only seen if you continue with at least three years treatment.

Contraindications

If you have asthma you are at greater risk of a severe adverse reaction to the treatment and therefore desensitisation would not be safe.

Other medications

It is very important that you tell the doctor which medications you are taking or if you start a new drug during the desensitisation period. Most drugs can be continued during desensitisation but some, for example, beta-blockers that are often prescribed for blood pressure or heart conditions must be stopped before treatment is started.

Precautions after an injection

Exercise can increase absorption of allergen from the injection site and can lead to increased risk of side effects. We would therefore recommend that vigorous exercise such as cycling home or taking part in any activity that involves strenuous use of your arms should not be undertaken for 24 hours after the injection.

If you are unwell

If you are unwell with a cold, flu or have a fever for any other reason your injection will have to be postponed until you recover. Please contact the clinic on 01223 256224 or 01223 216645.

Similarly, if your allergic symptoms have become worse for example during the hay fever season or if your asthma gets worse the injection dose may be either reduced or delayed.

Pregnancy

Desensitisation is not usually started or continued during pregnancy because of the risk to the baby should a severe reaction occur.



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Please ask if you require this information in other languages, large print or audio format: 01223 216032 or patient.information@addenbrookes.nhs.uk

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Polish

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Cantonese

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Bengali

Document History

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