

Patient information

Sublingual Immunotherapy Desensitisation

Allergy and Clinical Immunology

What is immunotherapy ?

Allergies occur when the body reacts to foreign proteins (allergens). In allergic rhinitis, nose symptoms (runny, itchy or blocked nose) or eye symptoms (itchy watery eyes) occur after contact with these allergens e.g. grass or tree pollen, house dust mite, dogs and cats.

Immunotherapy is the only treatment that can change the underlying allergic disease. The alternative is to continue with medicines that dampen down the symptoms such as antihistamines and nasal steroids.

How is immunotherapy given?

Immunotherapy is given either by injection under the skin (subcutaneous immunotherapy [SCIT]), or as a drop or a tablet under the tongue (sublingual immunotherapy [SLIT]). Giving increasing amounts of the allergen trains the immune system to ignore the allergen (immune tolerance).

Sublingual immunotherapy (SLIT) with drops under the tongue, or a fast-dissolving tablet is used particularly for patients with grass and tree pollen allergies, or those with house dust mite allergy.

The first dose will be given in hospital under close supervision, and you will be shown exactly how to take the treatment. After that, you can take the medicine at home, but you will need to do this regularly for three years.

What happens if I miss a dose?

For the treatment to work best, it is important that you take the SLIT as prescribed by the allergy team, every single day. Missing doses may result in a return of your rhinitis/asthma symptoms.

Should you forget to take your drops / tablet, take it later in the day if possible, but otherwise just continue with your normal once daily routine. Do not take a double dose to make up for a forgotten one.

How long will the treatment last?

The treatment needs to be given for three years

What are the benefits of immunotherapy?

Immunotherapy offers the potential for long term reduction in allergy symptoms. Nose and eye symptoms can improve by greater than 50%. This can have a huge impact on people's quality of life.

How safe is Sublingual Immunotherapy (SLIT)?

Sublingual immunotherapy (SLIT) is very safe. Large studies on thousands of people have not found any serious reactions (which do sometimes occur with SCIT).

The most common side effects are itchiness and swelling in the mouth after taking the drops or tablet. This can be prevented by taking antihistamines beforehand, or if the symptoms are recurrent, reducing the dose.

Because some of the medication is swallowed, people may find that they get some stomach ache and indigestion when they first start taking the treatment. Taking an antihistamine before having treatment will help and the symptoms will gradually settle down as the treatment goes on.

Studies report that side effects are very rarely troublesome enough for the patient to stop the treatment.

How do I know if SLIT will work for me?

SLIT works best if you are sensitised to one allergen and agree to regularly take medication every day. We will also ensure that, if you have asthma, it is well controlled so that you can have the treatment.

What if it doesn't work?

SLIT will not work for everybody. It leads to "very good" or "good" improvement in three out of four pollen allergic patients. It also reduces the use of hay fever medicines. If it doesn't work, patients usually return to relying on avoidance strategies and symptomatic treatment. Sometimes there are other allergies e.g. pet allergy or dust mite allergy that need to be sorted.

Sublingual Immunotherapy

Drops and tablets are taken every day for three years. The first dose is given in the clinic, after that you take it at home every day.

The drops or tablets are placed under the tongue. Tablets will just dissolve. **You are advised not to swallow for one minute.**

Your first dose will be given in the clinic to make sure you know how to take it. You will be asked to stay for half an hour afterwards to make sure you do not have any reactions.

Half of all reactions occur during the first three days of treatment. These usually get better quickly and stop after these doses.

- Very common side effects include mouth itching and irritation of the throat. These happen in more than one out of ten people. Taking an anti-histamine tablet will help this.
- Common side effects include headache, itchy eyes, itchy ears, itchy throat, blocked nose, wheeze, runny nose, sneezing, irritation of the voice box, swollen lips, swollen tongue, burning of the tongue, blisters in the mouth, pain in the mouth, stomach ache, feeling sick, vomiting, dry mouth, itching all over, rash, tiredness, feeling of something in the mouth. These happen in one to ten out of 100 people. Taking an anti-histamine tablet will help this.
- Uncommon side effects are itching of the eyelids, dizziness, throat tightness, pain in the throat, dry nose, inflammation in the mouth, inflammation of the stomach, difficulty swallowing, diarrhoea, wind, tongue blistering, serious allergic reaction causing lip, face and tongue swelling, anxiety, swelling of the feet or fingers. These happen in one to ten out of 1000 people.

If any of these side effects become serious please contact us or your family doctor (GP).

You will be given a three to six month supply of the drops or tablets. Please ring us when you have one month supply left so that we can order some more. You have to come to the clinic to pick them up.

The treatment lasts for three years. You will be contacted by telephone after the first year of treatment, if it is for pollen allergy, or after 6 months if you are treated for house dust mite allergy to check your response to treatment and the improvement in your symptoms. You will be asked to complete symptoms scoring sheet to assess your symptoms objectively.

If there was no improvement in the symptoms, the treatment will be discontinued. If your symptoms have improved in the first year the treatment will continue for three years.

This appointment is compulsory and if you fail to attend it, your treatment will be discontinued.

Feedback

Your feedback is important to us and helps us influence care in the future.

Following your discharge from hospital or attendance at your outpatient appointment you will receive a text asking if you would recommend our service to others. Please take the time to text back, you will not be charged for the text and can opt out at any point. Your co-operation is greatly appreciated.

Further information

Allergy Clinic telephone numbers:

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BSACI website

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