

Wasp and bee venom immunotherapy

Immunology Department Patient Information Leaflet

Introduction

This leaflet is for people who have an allergy to bee and wasp venom. It gives information about a treatment for this type of allergy called specific immunotherapy, including the benefits and risks of the treatment.

Bee and wasp venom allergy is one of the major causes of severe allergic reactions in the UK. Severe allergic reactions to stings can come on very quickly and are occasionally life-threatening. It therefore needs immediate treatment.

Immediate treatment for acute severe reactions includes using adrenalin auto-injectors, such as EpiPen or Jext, and anti-histamines. We will have discussed these with you in the allergy clinic.

What is specific immunotherapy?

Specific immunotherapy is also known as desensitisation. It is a treatment in which increasing doses of the specific venom (wasp or bee venom) are given in order to promote and improve the body's tolerance to the venom.

Venom immunotherapy is the only specific and potentially curative treatment that is currently available, to a carefully selected group of patients with a wasp or bee venom allergy.

What are the benefits?

Promoting the body's tolerance to wasp and bee stings should help to reduce your risk of severe allergic reactions to future stings.

What are the risks?

Redness, itching and sometimes swelling may occur at the site of injection. These usually settle without any treatment or with an antihistamine tablet. However, if you are concerned, please do not hesitate to discuss this with your GP.

These types of reactions are not a reason to stop the immunotherapy but sometimes we need to make adjustments to the dosage. Taking an antihistamine tablet one to two hours before the injection often reduces these reactions.

Serious reactions to immunotherapy are very rare. They usually occur within 30 minutes of having the injections and often in patients with other underlying medical problems. This is why it is recommended that you stay in the clinic area for at least 60 minutes after each injection. The doctors and nurses in clinic are experienced in treating this sort of reaction, if required.

Some patients may experience some symptoms six to 24 hours after the injection, known as delayed symptoms. These are usually minor and settle with paracetamol and an antihistamine tablet, if you can take them (always read the label; do not exceed the recommended dose). However, you should seek medical help from your GP if they are troublesome.

Please mention any delayed symptoms you experience to the doctor or nurse when you come for your next injection.

What are the alternatives?

It is your choice as to whether you have this treatment. If you prefer, you can continue with your current treatment.

What does the treatment involve?

Carefully calculated amounts of venom are given by injection into your arm. Initially, we build up your tolerance by giving gradually increasing amounts of venom at weekly intervals over a period of three months. This is known as the induction phase.

After this, we will give you a maintenance dose once every four to eight weeks until the end of the course. This is usually three to five years. This phase of treatment is called the maintenance phase.

What happens at each visit?

At each visit, the doctor or nurse records your pulse, blood pressure and any symptoms or illness that you may have had since the previous injection. They will then give you the injection into your arm.

After the injection, you must stay in the clinic area for at least 60 minutes. If you feel unwell after the injection, we may ask you to stay a little longer until the doctor is happy for you to leave.

What should I avoid after the injection?

You must avoid having long baths in hot water and any form of strenuous physical activity, for at least 24 hours after the injection. These activities may increase the risk of delayed reactions.

What about my medications?

We will discuss this with you before you start the immunotherapy. However, if you have a new illness or have been asked to start any new treatment during the course of immunotherapy, please tell the doctor or nurse before your next injection.

What if I miss an appointment?

It is important to attend the clinic every week for the first 12 weeks – the induction phase. Therefore, you will need to make sure you can be available for these appointments before you start the treatment.

If you really cannot attend and have to rearrange an appointment, ring the clinic through our switchboard on 01384 456111, or through the immunology secretary on 01384 244855 (8am to 4pm, Monday to Friday).

The dose and schedule of the injections will have to be readjusted. Please note that a gap of more than three weeks between injections in this phase may mean re-starting the whole treatment.

During the maintenance phase, rearranging the appointment by one to two weeks may not affect the schedule or dosage. If you are more than four weeks late for your injection during this phase, please discuss this with the doctor or nurse in the clinic.

If you cannot keep your appointment, please ring the clinic to rearrange it as soon as possible through our switchboard on 01384 456111, or through the immunology secretary on 01384 244855 (8am to 4pm, Monday to Friday).

Are there any reasons why I should not have the injections?

Immunotherapy injections are not recommended when you are ill or have an infection. Therefore, if you are ill when your injection is due, please ring the clinic through our switchboard on 01384 456111, or through the immunology secretary on 01384 244855 (8am to 4pm, Monday to Friday).

Immunotherapy injections should not be given at the same time as other vaccines such as travel vaccines. We would recommend at least two weeks between immunotherapy and vaccinations. Please discuss this with the doctor or nurse during your clinic appointment.

Can I have this treatment if I am pregnant?

Immunotherapy is not started if you are already pregnant or planning to have a baby. However, we can continue the treatment as scheduled if you become pregnant as long as:

- you are already well-established on the maintenance phase (four to eight weekly injections) and
- you have had no significant problems with the treatment

If you become pregnant, you should discuss this with the doctor or nurse in clinic before your next injection.

How long is the immunotherapy course?

The treatment lasts for three to five years. After the first 12 weeks, you will have to come for injections once every four to eight weeks.

Do I have to carry my Epipen, Jext or Anapen?

Yes, you should continue to carry your adrenalin pen at all times. Immunotherapy will protect most people completely from the effects of future stings. However, there is still a small chance of developing severe reactions, particularly if you are stung by several wasps or bees at the same time.

Can I find out more?

If you have any questions, or if there is anything you do not understand about this leaflet, please discuss this with the doctor or nurse in the clinic.

You can also ring the clinic through our switchboard on 01384 456111, or through the immunology secretary on 01384 244855 (8am to 4pm, Monday to Friday)

You can find out more about immunotherapy from the following weblink:

Allergy UK

<https://www.allergyuk.org/the-management-of-allergy/immunotherapy>

This leaflet can be downloaded or printed from:

<http://dudleygroup.nhs.uk/patients-and-visitors/patient-information-leaflets/>

If you have any feedback on this patient information leaflet, please email patient.information@dgh.nhs.uk

This leaflet can be made available in large print, audio version and in other languages, please call 0800 073 0510.

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此宣传单可提供大字版本、音频版本和其它语言版本，请拨打电话：0800 073 0510。

Ulotka dostępna jest również w dużym druku, wersji audio lub w innym języku. W tym celu zadzwoń pod numer 0800 073 0510.

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Aceasta broșura poate fi pusă la dispoziție tipărită cu caractere mari, versiune audio sau în alte limbi, pentru acest lucru vă rugăm sunați la 0800 073 0510.

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