

Allergen specific immunotherapy



Allergen specific immunotherapy is the administration by injection of increasing doses of allergens to which your animal reacted on the allergy test. Most owners will give the injections themselves at home once we teach them how to do it. This is the treatment of choice for most of the atopic pets. Approximately 70% to 80% of the cases will benefit from immunotherapy, without development of long term side effects, as can happen with chronic cortisone derivatives administration, for example.

Although its effects can sometimes be noticed in a few weeks of treatment, the global efficiency of the immunotherapy protocol can be appreciated after one year of treatment. The beneficial effects usually seen are a diminished frequency and severity of allergic crisis, decrease in administration of medications to control the itch or to eliminate skin infections (antibiotics, antifungals).

Immunotherapy proceeds in 2 steps: the induction period which last approximately 8 weeks, where injections are administered once a week with increasing doses of allergens and the maintenance phase where injections are usually given every 10-14 days.

If the improvement noted with immunotherapy is significant, we usually recommend continuing the injections for a few years.

After the first year of immunotherapy, it will be possible to modulate the injection's protocol depending on the needs of each patient. If your pet has symptoms only during summer time, the interval between injections can be extended every 4-6 weeks during winter. When the snow melts the frequency is increased before pollen season. Do not hesitate to contact your veterinarian specialized in dermatology/allergy to discuss the injection protocol that is best adapted to your pet.

Since it can take a few months before immunotherapy becomes effective, symptomatic treatment with cortisone, antihistamines, cyclosporin or essential fatty acids can be necessary during that time. Different medications are sometimes administered in combination depending on the case. The goal is to provide comfort with the least possible side effects. The dosage of these medications will often be adjusted to have a good control of the itch without eliminating it totally, to assess the effect of the immunotherapy vaccine.



Dr. Nadia Pagé, DMV, MSc, Dipl. ACVD
Dr. Caroline de Jaham, DMV, MSc, Dipl. ACVD



One of the most frequent errors is to stop giving the injections when there is a notable improvement. You have to continue the desensitization, if not, the allergy might come back and you will have to start the whole desensitization program all over again.

The other mistake would be to stop giving the injections after a few months because you think that it does not work. As mentioned above, it can take up to one year before immunotherapy becomes effective. You have to be patient, with all the effort and money that you've invested into it, you should continue with the injections without giving up too soon!

If for any reason you decide to stop immunotherapy, contact your veterinary dermatologist before doing so because it is possible that the persistent itch could be associated with skin infection, fleas etc. and that the allergy may have been in fact truly in remission with the injections.

There is also an alternative option to the standard immunotherapy protocol. With this alternative protocol, the induction period which normally takes 8 weeks is done in one day. The animal stays under observation at the DMV Veterinary Center for a day, where he will receive the treatment every 30-60 minutes. The goal of this procedure is to accelerate the response to immunotherapy. Back at home, you only have to administer the maintenance injections every 10-14 days.

Possible side effects from immunotherapy:

Some dogs may experience an increase in itchiness during the initial phase of immunotherapy. If this happens, contact us, we will give you instructions to adjust the dose of the vaccine.

With the exception of a temporary increase in itchiness, other side-effects are even less frequent, but if your animal doesn't seem to be his (her) self after the injection, contact us or your veterinarian. An animal that is sleeping excessively is hyperactive or seems uncomfortable after an injection may be showing warning signs of a reaction to the vaccination. Contact us or your veterinarian before giving any other doses of the immunotherapy vaccine. If these warning signs are ignored, more serious side-effects may be encountered with administration of the following doses.

Severe reactions are extremely rare, but if they do occur, they may be life-threatening. Difficulties in breathing, vomiting, diarrhoea, collapse, swelling, extensive skin rash or urticaria (lumps that develop on the body of your animal) require immediate medical attention. No other injections should be given without having the animal examined by a veterinarian.

SCHEDULE OF INJECTIONS

Note: The first 2 shots are given the same week, the injections are given 3 days apart (demonstration and vaccine # 1).

Week	Date of the injection	JAR # 1 (2000 PNU)
Vaccine demonstration		0.05 cc
1		0.1 cc
WEEKLY INJECTIONS		
2		0.2 cc
3		0.4 cc
4		1.0 cc

Week	Date of the injection	JAR # 2 (20 000 PNU)
WEEKLY INJECTIONS		
5		0.2 cc
6		0.4 cc
INJECTIONS EVERY 2 WEEKS		
8		0.5 cc
10		0.5 cc
12		0.5 cc
14		0.5 cc
Continue injections of 0.5 cc of the JAR # 2 every 2 weeks (maintenance dose)		