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## IMMUNOTHERAPY FOR INSECT STING ALLERGY

Allergy injections are often recommended if you are unable to avoid exposure to the allergens which provoke your reactions. This form of treatment is sometimes referred to as hyposensitization, desensitization, or immunotherapy, because it reduces your sensitivity or immune response to an allergenic substance such as insect venom. This series of injections works by gradually decreasing the amount of immunoglobulin E, or IgE (the allergy antibody) in your blood and tissues and inducing a tolerance to the venoms.

Venom immunotherapy begins with small injections of highly-diluted venoms. The dosage is gradually increased to an immunizing dose that is both maximally effective and safe for you. During the initial “build-up” phase, you should come for your injections every week. This usually takes 30 to 36 weeks, then the interval extends to once every four weeks. The usual course of immunotherapy for non-life-threatening reactions is five years. If the initial reaction was very severe or life-threatening, current guidelines recommend continuing injections indefinitely.

Because you are receiving venoms to which you are allergic, it is possible, but not likely, that you could have an allergic reaction. Consequently, it is essential that you remain in the office for 30 minutes after your injection.

Allergic reactions to venom immunotherapy are rare, but they can be uncomfortable and may require medications to counteract the symptoms. Most reactions occur within 30 minutes, but can occasionally be delayed. The most common reactions are local reactions at the injection site. These may consist of itching, redness, swelling, or warmth, and usually occur within fifteen minutes of the injection. They may last anywhere from several hours to several days. They are not dangerous, and usually do not require treatment. However, you should report any reactions to the nurse before the next injection, since it may be necessary to adjust your dosage.

The most serious potential reactions are those which occur away from the site of injection. These could include:

- feeling hot and flushed
- itching and hives or welts
- swelling of the lips, tongue, or throat
- cough, chest tightness, or wheezing
- a more serious generalized anaphylactic reaction. While this can be potentially life-threatening, such severe reactions are rare, and since the injections are given in a controlled medical setting, the risk is far lower than taking your chances with a reaction to an actual sting

Fortunately, insect venom immunotherapy is highly effective. It reduces your risk of a systemic reaction if you are restung from approximately 60% to approximately 2%. After stopping venom immunotherapy, reaction risk increases somewhat (to 10 – 15%), but remains well below the 60% risk if untreated. While it is no substitute for avoidance precautions and keeping your Epi-Pens with you at all times, venom immunotherapy can give you peace of mind that no other treatment can provide.