

Immunotherapy treatment with **Pharmalgen[®]** wasp or bee venom

This leaflet aims to answer your questions about having wasp or bee immunotherapy. It explains the benefits, risks and alternatives, as well as what you can expect when you come to hospital. If you have any other questions, please speak to a doctor or nurse caring for you.

If you are a young person thinking about having this treatment, please read this leaflet. Your parents/carers should read it too, as they will be involved in making the decision. The amount of involvement they have will depend upon a number of factors, including your age.

This leaflet is also for the parents/carers of young children having the treatment.

What is immunotherapy?

Immunotherapy or 'desensitisation' is a well-established treatment for certain severe allergies. It involves the administration of increasing doses of allergen (the substance you are allergic to) over a prolonged period of time, to help teach your immune system to tolerate it and not 'fight' it. Wasp and bee venom immunotherapy has been shown to lower the risk of severe reactions to wasp and bee stings. It is given as a course of regular injections under the skin over five years.

How is the treatment course given?

The first part of treatment consists of an 'up-dosing' phase, when you will visit our department on three occasions.

- First visit – you will receive six injections.
- Second visit (15 days after your first visit) – you will receive two injections.
- Third visit (45 days after your first visit) – you will receive one injection containing the full dose of venom immunotherapy.

After this you will enter the 'maintenance' phase of treatment, in which you will have injections:

- every four weeks for the first year
- every six weeks in the second year
- every eight weeks for the third, fourth and fifth year of your treatment course.

It is important that these appointments are kept throughout the maintenance phase. This schedule can be quite time-consuming on patients and families as the five year treatment entails many hospital visits and immunotherapy injections. You should take this into consideration when making a decision on whether or not to undertake venom immunotherapy.

What are the risks?

As with any medicine, there is a risk of side effects with wasp or bee venom immunotherapy. It is quite common to get some mild pain, itching and swelling at the site of the injection. It is also quite common to experience headaches and tiredness. If you experience any other effects which you believe may be due to the therapy, it is important that you let us know.

There is a small risk of an allergic reaction – this can range from mild (for example, mild skin rash) to severe (including anaphylaxis). For this reason, we ask that you wait in the clinic for one to two hours after you have had your injection so that we can monitor you.

Are there any alternatives?

An alternative option would be to choose not to receive the immunotherapy. You will need to keep your emergency plan, including antihistamine and self-injectable adrenaline, with you at all times in case of a bee or wasp venom sting.

How can I prepare for the treatment?

Take a dose of long-acting antihistamine, such as cetirizine, the night before coming to your venom immunotherapy appointment and another dose on the day of your injection, at least one hour before the first injection. This will reduce potential side effects of the injections. We will prescribe this for you at your clinic visit or your GP can prescribe this. Alternatively, cetirizine can be bought over the counter as tablets or a liquid.

What happens during the treatment?

Immunotherapy injections are given on the Allergy Daycare Unit, at St Thomas' Hospital.

- 1 The first 'up-dosing' visit will start at 9.30am and last until about 4.30pm. You may want to bring a book or magazine with you to read while you wait. The second and third 'up-dosing' visits will last half a day. The maintenance dose visits will take about two hours.
- 2 When you come in for your immunotherapy injection, the allergy nurse will ask you about your health and how you have been since the last injection. If you experienced any side effects after the last injection, record these for us and bring this with you to the next visit.
- 3 You will then be examined and have some basic observations recorded.
- 4 We will ask you to blow into a lung function machine to make sure your lung function is good enough to start the treatment.
- 5 When you attend your three 'up-dosing' visits you will have a cannula (a thin flexible tube) inserted into a vein in your arm/hand as an additional safety measure. This is so that we can quickly give you emergency medicines to treat any side effects to the immunotherapy that you may have, which are more common during this phase of treatment.
- 6 The immunotherapy injection will be placed under the skin of your upper arm using a very fine needle. Generally it will be placed into opposite arms for each injection.

A very small number of people have allergic reactions to the venom – these usually occur within an hour of getting the injection. You will therefore be asked to wait for two hours after the last injection on your three 'up-dosing' visits, so that we can monitor you and give you the appropriate treatment if needed. During your 'maintenance' visits you will be asked to wait for one hour after receiving an injection. You will need to stay on the Allergy Day Care unit during this time.

Please tell your doctor or nurse immediately if you notice any signs of allergy, such as:

- a rash
- itching or hives on the skin
- swelling of the face, lips, tongue or other parts of the body
- fast heart beat
- dizziness and light-headedness
- shortness of breath, wheezing or trouble breathing
- any other new symptoms.

Can I take other medicines while I am having immunotherapy?

Some medicines cannot be taken during immunotherapy treatment, for example, some medicines that may be prescribed for heart conditions or depression. Vaccines must not be given within seven days before or after an injection of immunotherapy. It is therefore important that you let us know about any medicines you are currently taking (including herbal medicines), and that you check with us, your GP or your pharmacist before you start taking anything new. Alternatively you can call the Evelina London Medicines Helpline for advice (contact details are at the end of this leaflet).

Giving my consent (permission)

The staff caring for you will need to ask your permission to give the treatment. You will be asked to sign a consent form that says you have agreed to the treatment and that you understand the benefits, risks and alternatives. In some circumstances, including if you are under 16 years old, your parents/carer might be asked to sign the form on behalf of you. If there is anything you don't understand or you need more time to think about it, please tell the staff caring for you.

Remember, it is your decision. You can change your mind at any time, even if you have signed the consent form. We recommend that once you start the venom immunotherapy that you complete the whole five year course in order for it to be effective.

Let staff know immediately if you change your mind. Your wishes will be respected at all times. If you would like to read our consent policy, please tell a member of staff.

Will I feel any pain?

You might feel some discomfort when you get the injections or when the cannula is inserted. We will offer you some anaesthetic cream that can numb the injection site to make it less sore.

What happens after the immunotherapy treatment?

After your one to two hour waiting time, the allergy nurse will ask how you are feeling, do another lung function test and check the injection site. The nurse will let you know if you can then go home.

Can I stop carrying my emergency kit (antihistamine and self-injectable adrenaline) while receiving immunotherapy?

No. You must continue to have your emergency plan, including antihistamine and self-injectable adrenaline, with you at all times in case of a bee or wasp venom sting.

What do I need to do after I go home?

- 1 Avoid heavy exercise such as the gym/aerobics or running in the evening after receiving immunotherapy as you may feel unwell. These activities increase local circulation and increase the rate of absorption of the injected substance.
- 2 Avoid hot baths/saunas on the day of the immunotherapy as this may also make you feel unwell.
- 3 Some patients find their eczema or hay fever becomes briefly worse after each immunotherapy injection. This normally settles down with time, is rarely serious and usually responds to an antihistamine.
- 4 If you feel unwell or have a large local skin reaction at the injection site you may benefit from taking an antihistamine and using an ice-pack.
- 5 Tiredness on the day of the immunotherapy may occur. Please plan a quiet evening and avoid extra commitments if possible. This rarely lasts longer than 24 hours.

What should I do if I have a problem?

Get medical advice immediately if you notice any signs of an allergic reaction, such as:

- a rash
- itching or hives on the skin
- swelling of the face, lips, tongue or other parts of the body
- a fast heart beat
- dizziness and light-headedness
- shortness of breath, wheezing or trouble breathing
- any other new symptoms that make you feel very unwell.

Contact your GP or go straight to your nearest Emergency Department (A&E).

Important: If you experience any breathing problems go straight to your local Emergency Department.

Will I have a follow-up appointment?

After you have completed the 'up-dosing phase', you will come to the clinic for your maintenance injections. You will also be seen at the allergy clinic about once a year to monitor your progress during the treatment. We ask that you and your parent/carer make every effort to attend all appointments. You can book your next appointment for wasp or bee venom immunotherapy with the allergy department at each visit.

Contact us

If you have any questions or concerns about your immunotherapy treatment, please contact the Allergy Nurse Specialist, **t:** 020 7188 9783, Monday to Friday, 9am-5pm. Please leave a message if you get our answering machine and the allergy nurse will return your call within 24 hours (Monday to Friday).

Our clinic is at St Thomas' Hospital in the Children's Allergies Department, Children's Dermatology Outpatients, 2nd floor, Stairwell B, South Wing.

Allergy Nurse helpline

www.zesty.co.uk/practices/childrens-allergy-nurse-helpline

For more information leaflets on conditions, procedures, treatments and services offered at our hospitals, visit **w:** www.evelinalondon.nhs.uk/leaflets

Evelina London Medicines Helpline

If you have any questions or concerns about your child's medicines, please speak to the staff caring for them or contact our helpline.

t: 020 7188 3003, Monday to Friday, 10am to 5pm **e:** letstalkmedicines@gstt.nhs.uk

Your comments and concerns

For advice, support or to raise a concern, contact our Patient Advice and Liaison Service (PALS). To make a complaint, contact the complaints department.

t: 020 7188 8801 (PALS) **e:** pals@gstt.nhs.uk
t: 020 7188 3514 (complaints) **e:** complaints2@gstt.nhs.uk

Language and accessible support services

If you need an interpreter or information about your care in a different language or format, please get in touch. **t:** 020 7188 8815 **e:** languagesupport@gstt.nhs.uk

NHS 111

Offers medical help and advice from fully trained advisers supported by experienced nurses and paramedics. Available over the phone 24 hours a day. **t:** 111

NHS website

Online information and guidance on all aspects of health and healthcare, to help you take control of your health and wellbeing. **w:** www.nhs.uk

Get involved and have your say: become a member of the Trust

Members of Guy's and St Thomas' NHS Foundation Trust contribute to the organisation on a voluntary basis. We count on them for feedback, local knowledge and support. Membership is free and it is up to you how much you get involved. To find out more, please get in touch.

t: 0800 731 0319 **e:** members@gstt.nhs.uk **w:** www.guysandstthomas.nhs.uk/membership

Was this leaflet useful?

We want to make sure the information you receive is helpful to you. If you have any comments about this leaflet, we would be happy to hear from you, fill in our simple online form, **w:** www.guysandstthomas.nhs.uk/leaflets, or **e:** patientinformationteam@gstt.nhs.uk

Leaflet number: 3021/VER3

Date published: January 2019

Review date: January 2022

© 2019 Guy's and St Thomas' NHS Foundation Trust
A list of sources is available on request