

Treating a food allergy with desensitization



This treatment has been suggested to try to reduce an allergy you have to one or more foods. This fact sheet explains how it works and what you need to do.

What is the purpose of the treatment?

The aim is to make it possible for you to eat a certain quantity of the food to which you're sensitive without causing an allergic reaction.

This would protect you in case of accidental contact with the food. You might even be able to fully add it back into your diet.

What does the treatment involve?

Every day, you'll eat small amounts of the food (allergen) that causes the allergy. These doses will be gradually increased.

Little by little, your body will learn to tolerate the food without having an allergic reaction.

This treatment is called oral immunotherapy or food desensitization.

Throughout the treatment, your healthcare team will closely monitor you.

Are there any risks?

During desensitization, you'll probably experience some allergic reactions. These should be mild and limited to the mouth and stomach. Your doctor may suggest that you take medication before each dose to avoid these reactions. You can discuss this with your doctor.

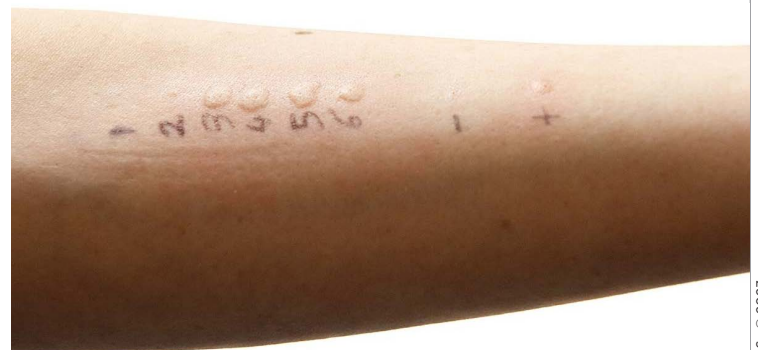
However, more serious reactions could occur, so it's important to know how to use an epinephrine auto-injector (e.g., EpiPen, Allerject).

How long does the treatment take?

In adults, an allergy never completely disappears. For your body to continue not to react to the targeted food, you'll need to take small doses throughout your life, either daily or every 2 or 3 days. However, after 3 years, permanent protection may occur. This would reduce the severity of reactions even after you stop taking the doses.

How is the treatment done?

> First, you'll see an allergist, who will confirm your food allergy with a skin test and a blood sample.



- > The next step is to find out how much of the food it takes for your body to have an allergic reaction. This is called a provocation test. It involves giving you increasing doses of the food. As soon as there's a slight reaction, the testing is stopped. This is done to determine the doses you need to take during treatment.
- > Your doctor will work with you to set the objective for the desensitization. For example, you may want to be able to eat cake containing eggs or travel to Asia without fear of accidentally eating a dish containing peanuts. This objective helps determine how far to take the desensitization process.
- > Then, you go home and take your first doses. These are often small, specific quantities of the food in question (e.g., a quarter of a peanut, a certain number of grams of a cake made with 4 eggs, a certain number of millilitres of milk diluted in water).



You'll need to take the same dose every day until your next follow-up appointment. At each appointment, the dose will be increased based on your tolerance.

How should I take the doses?

- > Take your doses at the same time every day.
- > Take them with a meal or a snack.
- > Stay awake for 1 hour after taking a dose to monitor for any allergic reaction.

What precautions should I take?

Before and after taking a dose, you should avoid certain things that could make you more sensitive to the food. These could lead to stronger-than-usual allergic reactions or cause a reaction to a dose that is otherwise normally tolerated. Here are the instructions:

6 hours before and 2 hours after a dose :

- Don't drink alcohol.
- Don't take any non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (e.g., Advil, Naproxen, aspirin).

1 hour before and 2 hours after a dose :

- Don't engage in activities that raise your temperature and heart rate: sports, climbing stairs quickly, sexual intercourse, etc.
- Don't take hot showers.
- Don't eat any foods to which you're allergic.

Lack of sleep can also make you more sensitive to the food. Make sure you get enough sleep.

If you're ill (cold, flu, diarrhea, vomiting, etc.) or have a fever over 38.5 °C (101.3 °F) :

- Reduce the doses by half for the duration of your illness.
- Resume normal doses 24 hours after the symptoms have disappeared.
- If the symptoms last longer than 5 days, call your healthcare team.

What signs should I watch for?

Mild allergic reaction. This could be a stomach ache or a tingling sensation around the mouth or in the throat that lasts less than 30 minutes.

Carry antihistamines with you at all times (e.g., Reactine, Claritin, Blexten, Rupall, Aerius). They can provide relief.



Don't stop taking your doses. If in doubt, reduce the doses by half and contact the Immuno-allergy Clinic.

More severe allergic reaction. Always carry **2 epinephrine auto-injectors**. Use one immediately if you have allergy symptoms such as:

- breathing problems, coughing
- wheezing
- difficulty swallowing your saliva
- dizziness
- hives all over your body
- vomiting or diarrhea



When in doubt, don't hesitate to use the auto-injector. If the symptoms don't subside or worsen, use the 2nd injector and call **9-1-1** or have someone drive you to the emergency room right away.



Make sure your friends and family know how to recognize the signs of an allergic reaction and how to use the auto-injector if necessary.

Who can I contact for help or to ask questions?

You can call the Immuno-allergy Clinic, Monday to Friday, from 8:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m.

> **514-890-8000, ext. 21542**

(You can leave a message on the nurses' voicemail.)

> **514 890-8231 (secretary)**

Outside of business hours, for any question related to your health, you can call a nurse at the CHUM Patient Health Line.

> **514 890-8086**

This service is available 7 days a week, 24 hours a day. When calling, be sure to have your RAMQ health insurance card on hand.



USEFUL RESOURCES

Other health sheets published by the CHUM are available. Ask for those that might fit your situation.



You can also find them on our website

chumontreal.qc.ca/fiches-sante



Questions

The content of this document in no way replaces the recommendations and diagnoses made, or the treatment suggested by your health professional.

To find out more about the Centre hospitalier de l'Université de Montréal
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