

Wasp and bee venom desensitisation

Information for patients

This information sheet answers some of the questions you may have about treatment for wasp and bee venom desensitisation.

What is desensitisation?

Desensitisation is a way of treating people who have had a severe allergic reaction to a wasp or bee sting. Affected people will be injected a number of times with small, but increasing amounts of venom extract. Desensitisation is also called immunotherapy or hyposensitisation.

What are the benefits of desensitisation?

You will gradually become used to the venom, which will prevent or reduce a reaction to any future stings.

What happens during the treatment?

You will receive regular injections in your arm – initially weekly. We gradually increase the dose (updosing phase) each time so that by 12 to 16 weeks you will be able to tolerate a large amount (several stings worth) of venom. You will then need monthly top-up injections for three years (maintenance phase).

How long will each visit take?

The injection only takes a few minutes but you will need to stay in the clinic under observation for one hour. This is because most reactions happen within the first hour following the injection. In the very rare case of a bad reaction, we can treat you immediately in the clinic.

Consent

Staff will explain all the risks, benefits and alternatives before they ask you to sign a consent form. If you are unsure about any aspect of the treatment proposed, please do not hesitate to speak with a senior member of staff again.

Are there any side effects?

There are two types of side effects you may experience:

- Local, which affects the area injected
- General, which affects the whole body

Local reactions are usually minor. The injection site may become itchy, red or swollen. Placing an ice pack over the area and taking antihistamine tablets treats this.

General reactions may be mild, such as feeling tired for a short time after the first few injections – this is the most common general reaction.

Severe general reactions may include an itchy rash, wheezing or difficulty breathing, or feeling faint due to a drop in your blood pressure.

These reactions are rare, and more likely to happen in the up dosing phase rather than in the maintenance phase.

General reactions may be treated with anti-histamines, steroids, or rarely adrenaline.

If you experience any reaction to the injection after leaving the hospital please phone the allergy department (details on page 3 of this leaflet).

If you have a severe reaction you should go to your nearest Emergency Department. They can call the King's College Hospital on-call clinical immunologist for information.

Are there any risks?

The risk of a serious reaction is very small as your treatment is carried out in a specialised hospital allergy clinic. The doctors and nurses treating you are trained in desensitisation and use high-quality vaccines.

Does it work?

Three different studies have shown a high protection rate even seven years after the treatment was stopped. These patients were treated for three to five years and the vast majority remained protected over a prolonged period of time.

Is there anything I must not do after having an injection?

You should not exercise vigorously after an injection as this makes your body absorb the venom too quickly and may cause the side effects mentioned.

When must I not have an injection?

It is not safe to inject you if you are feeling unwell for any reason – including having a cold or any flu-like symptoms. If you arrive for your appointment and feel unwell you will not be treated. If you are unsure whether or not to come into hospital please phone Dorothea (number on page 3 of this leaflet).

Can I still be treated if I am pregnant?

We will not begin a programme of desensitisation if you are pregnant. However if you are in the middle of treatment and have already reached the maintenance phase then we may continue.

Are there any alternatives?

The alternative to desensitisation is to carry adrenaline pens (for example, an Epipen) with you. This is not a cure, but it will give you time to call an ambulance to take you to your nearest Emergency Department. You may also be given other medication to take in case of an anaphylactic reaction.

When is the clinic held?

The clinic is held every Thursday afternoon from 2pm to 3.30pm. Please make sure you have a new appointment at the clinic reception before you leave the hospital each time.

Cancelling appointments

If you are unable to attend the clinic for any reason you must phone the appointments office as early as possible to cancel your appointment. To cancel your appointment please phone **020 3299 1919**. If you are unsure whether the clinic would classify you as unwell or ill, call Dorothea (see below for details).

Remember: do not come into the clinic if you are ill as we cannot treat you – please phone beforehand.

Contact us

Consultants:

Dr Mohammad A A Ibrahim

Dr Zoe Adhya

Dr Rohit Ghurye

Tel: **020 3299 1555**

Clinical Nurse Specialist:

Dorothea Grosse-Kreul

Tel: **020 3299 5175**

Sharing your information

We have teamed up with Guy's and St Thomas' Hospitals in a partnership known as King's Health Partners Academic Health Sciences Centre. We are working together to give our patients the best possible care, so you might find we invite you for appointments at Guy's or St Thomas'. To make sure everyone you meet always has the most up-to-date information about your health, we may share information about you between the hospitals.

Care provided by students

We provide clinical training where our students get practical experience by treating patients. Please tell your doctor or nurse if you do not want students to be involved in your care. Your treatment will not be affected by your decision.

PALS

Appropriate PALS information depending on location/site will be placed in by the Publications Team.

Tel: **020 3299 3601**

Email: **kch-tr.PALS@nhs.net**

If you would like the information in this leaflet in a different language or format, please contact PALS on 020 3299 1844.