

# TEXAS REGIONAL ASTHMA AND ALLERGY CENTER, L.L.P.

*Board Certified specialists in allergy, asthma, immunology, and respiratory disorders*

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## SUBLINGUAL IMMUNOTHERAPY (SLIT) FAQ'S

**Q: What is sublingual immunotherapy?**

**A:** Sublingual immunotherapy, also called SLIT, or allergy drops, is the name given to allergy serum that is given in drops under the tongue rather than as an injection, or shot in the arm. Allergy immunotherapy treats the cause of allergies by giving small doses of what a person is allergic to, which increases "immunity" or tolerance to the allergen and reduces allergic symptoms. Immunotherapy is used for the treatment of allergies to pollens, molds, animals, and dust mites.

While there are many medications that help control or temporarily relieve allergy symptoms such as antihistamines and nasal steroid sprays, immunotherapy is the only treatment that can potentially eliminate allergies.

**Q: How does the process work?**

**A:** The first step is to confirm a patient's allergies through allergy skin testing. After your provider reviews your allergy test results, they will then discuss whether you are a good candidate for SLIT. Once the decision has been made to begin SLIT a custom mixed vial of allergy serum is prepared for the patient. The patient administers drops under the tongue daily. The process lasts several years, approximately 5, and over time the body learns long term tolerance to the allergens.

Initially there are a few build-up bottles that help the body get used to the allergens then drops are advanced to a concentrate bottle, which will become your maintenance bottle. While you will be taking your drops daily it may be several months before you notice any improvement with your allergy symptoms. This is normal as it takes a long time for the body to develop long term tolerance with both SLIT and allergy injections.

**Q: Is sublingual immunotherapy safe?**

**A:** Allergy drops have been used around the world for more than 60 years, and numerous studies validate both the safety and effectiveness. The World Health Organization has endorsed sublingual immunotherapy as a viable alternative to allergy injections therapy. Although SLIT is not approved for use in the United States by the FDA, the antigens used in allergy drops are the same physician prescribed antigens used in allergy injection therapy. They are also prepared the same way as allergy injections, using the same guidelines and parameters. The difference is the route of administration and the use of a natural preservative, a dispenser which delivers the antigen under the tongue rather than an injecting antigen into the arm tissue. Currently antigens are labeled by the FDA for use through injections only. Using them for sublingual immunotherapy is an "off-label" use of an FDA approved biologic, which is both legal and fairly common. Most providers prescribe a number of medications today for "off-label" use, for example, the use of certain blood pressure medications for migraines, aspirin for heart conditions, and others.

Over the past 10 years, the safety of SLIT has been well documented. Serious and fatal reactions to SLIT have not been reported to date. Mild side effects, such as itchy mouth, occur in the majority of people and moderate side effects have been documented (1 in about every 12,000 doses) including:

- lip mouth and tongue irritation
- eye itching, redness and swelling
- nausea, vomiting, abdominal cramping and diarrhea
- sneezing, nasal itching and congestion
- worsening asthma symptoms
- itching of the skin, hives or swelling

Because of the safety of SLIT, patient's administer the drops themselves at home and are followed up in the doctor's office at regular intervals, usually about twice a year to monitor response to treatment.

**Q:** Who could (or should) receive SLIT?

**A:** People with documented allergies by allergy skin testing can be considered for SLIT. Young children have been shown to tolerate and benefit from SLIT as have older adults. Pregnant women can continue on SLIT during pregnancy, but should not start therapy while pregnant, which is the normal rule of thumb for allergy injections. People with severe asthma may need to be monitored more closely on any form of immunotherapy, including SLIT since asthma symptoms can worsen with immunotherapy.

Most studies on SLIT have focused on people with one type of allergy, such as grass or dust mite allergy. People with multiple allergies, such as to molds, pollens, pet dander and dust mite may be better candidates for shots, given the large volume of different allergen extracts that would need to be taken. Your provider will discuss whether you are a likely candidate for SLIT.

**Q:** Does it work?

**A:** Many published scientific studies have shown that SLIT significantly reduces allergy symptoms over time.

**Q:** How long must I continue the treatment?

**A:** It is recommended that patients keep using their allergy drops for approximately 5 years to achieve maximum benefit and for the body to build up a lasting "immunity".

**Q:** How long can I expect the effects of allergy drops to last?

**A:** The benefit of immunotherapy -whether allergy shots or allergy drops – is that it can alter the course of allergic diseases by treating the root cause, not the just symptoms. Key studies have already been conducted to explore the long-lasting effect of allergy drops, including a 10-year prospective study on children with asthma that demonstrated drops maintained effectiveness long after treatment had stopped.

The key to ensuring the effects is compliance, which is an additional benefit of allergy drops. Studies show that patients taking allergy drops tend to stay with their treatment 90% of the time, which is significantly higher than with other routes of treatment. Why is compliance so much higher? Patients appreciate the convenience of being able to take their drops wherever they are, eliminating the need to make frequent clinic visits and the savings in time and money that result.

But even the best treatment won't work if you don't stay with them. Like allergy shot treatment, it's important to stay with allergy drop treatment until your doctor has determined treatment can be discontinued.

**Q:** Will I still need to take my allergy medications?

**A:** It may be necessary to continue taking your allergy medications for a while until you have noticed an improvement on your allergy drops. This can be discussed with your provider.

**Q:** What are the costs? Will it be covered by insurance?

**A:** Most insurance plans will not cover SLIT. Sublingual immunotherapy is considered "off-label" in the United States since the FDA has not approved allergy serum for use in the oral form in this country. Please speak to your physician or our SLIT coordinator regarding the expense.

Call 817-421-0770 to schedule an appointment with one of the doctors to discuss if you are a candidate for this treatment.

