

OHSU Allergy and Immunology

Food Allergen Immunotherapy

Food allergen immunotherapy is a treatment for food allergies that involves gradually exposing the body to the allergen, with the goal of desensitizing the immune system and reducing the severity of allergic reactions. It is important to note that food allergen immunotherapy is not a cure for food allergies, and patients will still need to avoid certain foods and carry emergency medication, such as an epinephrine auto-injector, in case of accidental exposure. However, for some patients, food allergen immunotherapy can provide an additional layer of protection and improve their quality of life.

There are three types of food allergen immunotherapy: oral immunotherapy, sublingual immunotherapy, and epicutaneous immunotherapy.

Oral Immunotherapy (OIT) involves eating small amounts of the allergen, starting with a tiny dose and gradually increasing over time, under medical supervision. This treatment can take several months or years to complete, and requires regular follow-up visits with an allergist. OIT has been shown to be effective in desensitizing patients to food allergens, and can result in fewer and milder allergic reactions. Only one FDA-approved product is available at this time for peanut allergies called Palforzia. Many providers though do perform OIT to other foods in their clinic.

Sublingual Immunotherapy (SLIT) involves placing a small amount of the allergen extract under the tongue, where it is absorbed into the bloodstream. Like OIT, SLIT involves gradually increasing the dose over time.

Epicutaneous Immunotherapy (EPIT) involves gradually applying a patch containing the allergen extract to the skin, where it is absorbed into the bloodstream. There are no FDA-approved EPIT products but several are in the pipeline and will be available in the next few years.

Before considering any type of food allergen immunotherapy, patients should talk to their allergist about the risks and benefits of the treatment, as well as their individual allergy history and medical condition. Food allergen immunotherapy should always be done under the supervision of a trained medical professional, as it can cause severe allergic reactions in some patients.

Sources

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