

Mechanism of action of allergen immunotherapy

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ABSTRACT

Background: Allergen immunotherapy (AIT) leads to the production of anti-allergen immunoglobulin (IgG) or “blocking antibody” in the serum and an increase in anti-allergen IgG and IgA in nasal secretions. There is also a decrease in the usual rise in anti-allergen IgE that occurs after the pollen season.

Methods: In this paper, mechanisms of action of allergen immunotherapy is reviewed.

Results: Regulatory T (Treg) cells and their cytokines, primarily interleukin (IL) 10 and transforming growth factor beta, suppress T-helper type 2 immune responses and control allergic diseases in many ways. AIT induces a shift in the proportion of IL-4-secreting T-helper type 2 cells in favor of IL-10-secreting inducible Treg cells specific for the same allergenic epitope that increases in number and function. Different types of inducible Treg control several facets of allergic inflammation. There are two main types of immunotherapy: subcutaneous immunotherapy and sublingual immunotherapy. Subcutaneous immunotherapy is efficacious and is indicated for the reduction of seasonal symptoms. Sublingual immunotherapy involves the regular self-administration and retention of allergen extract under the tongue for 1–2 minutes before the extract is swallowed. The allergens cross the mucosa in 15–30 minutes and are then captured by tolerogenic dendritic cells and processed as small peptides. Next, via the lymphatic system, a systemic immune response is created to produce an early decrease in mast cell and basophil degranulation.

Conclusion: AIT is indicated for the treatment of moderate-to-severe intermittent or persistent symptoms of allergic rhinitis. AIT can be administered to those >5 years of age and has been shown to be safe in children as young as 3 years of age. In this article, AIT and other types of immunotherapies were discussed as well as the indications for immunotherapy.

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IMMUNOLOGIC RESPONSES

Allergen immunotherapy (AIT) decreases the sensitivity to allergens and often leads to lasting relief of allergy symptoms even after treatment is stopped.¹ AIT triggers multiple, sequentially activated mechanisms that work in concert, which leads to clinical events that elicit rapid desensitization to allergen, allergen-specific immune tolerance, and suppression of the allergic inflammation.^{2,3} AIT leads to the production of anti-allergen immunoglobulin G (IgG) or “blocking antibody” in the serum and an increase in anti-allergen IgG and IgA in nasal secretions. There is also a decrease in the usual rise of anti-allergen IgE that occurs after the pollen season.^{4,5} The anti-allergen IgE decreases with long-term immunotherapy, although it rarely disappears. Thus, there is no rationale for annual allergy skin testing as a parameter for monitoring AIT. Patients should experience definite reductions in symptoms after a year of injections.

AIT results in the reduced mononuclear cell production of histamine-releasing factors.⁴ Patients who have been treated with immunotherapy show suppression of immediate and late-phase nasal reactions after allergen challenge, and it has been shown that patients have diminished eosinophil counts in nasal secretions after nasal

challenge.^{5–7} AIT has been associated with decreased allergen-specific CD4⁺ cell proliferation and alterations of T-cell cytokines at local allergen challenge sites, with decreased recruitment of T cells to allergen-challenged sites. In the skin, the messenger RNA expression of T-helper (Th) 1 CD4⁺ cell-type cytokines (interferon γ , IL-2) is upregulated after immunotherapy, but there is no effect on CD4⁺ cell Th2 cytokine (IL-4, IL-5) expression upon allergen exposure after immunotherapy.^{8,9}

Regulatory T (Treg) cells and cytokines of them (IL-10 and transforming growth factor β) suppress Th2-type immune responses and control allergic diseases. In B cells, they induce IgG4 and IgA, and suppress IgE. In Th2 cells, they suppress proliferation of the tissues. In mast cells, basophils, and eosinophils, there are suppressive effects. By direct and indirect suppression, epithelial cell activation and pro-inflammatory properties occur. In addition, B regulatory 1 cells, which produce IL-10, suppress effector T cells and B regulatory 1 cells have a role to produce IgG4 synthesis.¹⁰ IL-10 can decrease B-cell antigen-specific IgE production and increase IgG4 levels. Proinflammatory cytokine release from mast cells, eosinophils, and T cells decreases. Consequently, lymphoproliferative responses to allergens are reduced after immunotherapy.¹¹ Allergen-specific immune deviation from a Th2 to a Th1 occurs.^{12–14}

AIT induces a shift in the proportion of IL-4-secreting Th2 cells in favor of IL-10-secreting inducible Treg cells specific for the same allergenic epitope that increases in number and function. Different types of inducible Treg control several facets of allergic inflammation. They are composed of positive Forkhead box protein 3 adaptive Treg cells and negative FOXP3, IL-10-producing type 1 regulatory T cells. Treg cells regulate IgG4 versus IgE and induce allergen-specific antibodies toward the nonanaphylactic and noninflammatory types.^{15,16}

IMMUNOTHERAPY TYPES

Sublingual immunotherapy (SLIT) has a better safety profile, with less systemic reactions and, to date, no reported fatal reactions.¹⁷ Subcutaneous immunotherapy (SCIT), the primary method of AIT in the United States, has a slightly better efficacy profile and readily allows for treatment of patients with polyallergy.¹⁷

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SCIT

SCIT is associated with transient increases in allergen-specific IgE levels and IgG (particularly IgG4¹⁸) and IgA.¹⁹ Serum antibody concentration is related to the dose of allergen that is administered.¹⁹ Serum obtained after SCIT inhibits allergen-IgE binding to B cells,²⁰ mediated by IgG4. "Blocking" antibodies inhibits IgE-facilitated antigen presentation. SCIT decreases the numbers of effector cells at mucosal sites, both during seasonal allergen exposure²¹ and after allergen challenge,²² and reduces effector cell reactivity *in vitro*.²³ In allergic diseases, there is a relative imbalance between Treg and Th2 cells.²⁴ The former cell type can be divided into "naturally occurring" thymus-derived CD4⁺ CD25⁺ cells, which are positive for the transcription factor Forkhead box protein 3, and "adaptive" regulatory cells, either "Tr1 IL-10-secreting cells" or Th3-transforming growth factor-secreting cells.²⁵ Increased proportions of allergen nonspecific Treg cells have been described with SCIT, which supported the role of Treg cells and their secreted cytokines in the mechanism of successful therapy.^{26,27}

A Cochrane systematic review showed that SCIT for seasonal allergic rhinitis (AR)²⁸ was efficacious and causes reductions in seasonal symptoms. SCIT and SLIT improve asthma symptoms in adults and children with atopic asthma who are clinically sensitized to seasonal and perennial allergens.^{29–31} Meta-analyses of placebo-controlled trials in patients with asthma indicated small improvements in symptoms and lung function by an active therapy.^{32–34} By year 3 of house-dust mite SCIT administration in adults with atopic asthma, the adults were slightly sensitized to mites and bronchodilator usage reduced. Whereas inhaled corticosteroid dosages and bronchial responsiveness to methacholine did not change.³⁵

SLIT

SLIT products should be placed under the tongue, which allows the allergen to be in contact with the oral mucosa for at least 2 minutes through the dendritic cells. The allergens cross the mucosa in 15–30 minutes. They are then captured by tolerogenic dendritic cells and processed as small peptides. Next, *via* the lymphatic system, a systemic immune response is created to produce an early decrease in mast cell and basophil degranulation. Allergen-specific Treg cell, Th1 cell, and Th2 cell suppression occurs later. Specific IgE levels increase in an early step and, later, they decrease. In the early period, the IgG4 level also increases, which is dose-dependent. A significant decrease in the allergen-specific IgE:IgG4 ratio occurs after several months.³⁶ Recent meta-analyses showed that SLIT was efficient in children.^{37,38} Serrano *et al.*³⁹ reported that AIT with 300IR 5-grass pollen sublingual tablets was consistently associated with AR symptom relief in adults and children. SLIT is an effective treatment modality for seasonal AR and improves quality of life and can potentially prevent asthma.⁴⁰

INDICATIONS

AIT is indicated for the treatment of moderate-to-severe intermittent or persistent symptoms of AR. AIT can be administered to children >5 years of age and has been shown to be safe in children as young as 3 years of age.^{2,41–43} The recommended duration of AIT for AR is 5 years for both the subcutaneous and sublingual routes.¹ Significant improvement in nasal and ocular symptom scores reduced the need for symptomatic medication and improved quality of life both during and after discontinuation of AIT have been consistently demonstrated in double-blind, placebo-controlled studies.^{44–46} The major advantage of AIT in the treatment of AR is the prevention of asthma and reduction in new sensitizations.^{2,44–46}

When patients are selected for immunotherapy, the underlying allergic trigger should be identified by history and skin and/or blood test results for allergen-specific IgE. IgE sensitization to additional inhalant allergens is not a contraindication. Single AIT is less likely to be effective if exposure to other allergens contributes to the ongoing symptoms. Immunotherapy improves symptoms of AR and decreases use of med-

ications to treat AR.^{47,48} Specific immunotherapy should be prescribed by specialists. SCIT should be administered in a setting where procedures that can reduce the risk of anaphylaxis are in place and where the prompt recognition and treatment of anaphylaxis is ensured.⁴⁹ SLIT can be used at home, and the patients can take it by themselves.^{48,50,51}

To be eligible for SLIT, important items are mentioned.⁴⁹ There is a clinical history of allergy and allergen-specific IgE positive test results. For SLIT, age does not seem to be a limitation. Ideal candidates for SLIT are patients who are monosensitized. Even for patients who are polysensitized, single-allergen SLIT has been effective. Investigations are ongoing for the use of SLIT in latex allergy, atopic dermatitis, food allergies, and *Hymenoptera* venom allergy. In non-IgE-mediated hypersensitivity (for instance, nickel sensitivity), SLIT is not indicated. In the appropriate case, SLIT should be an initial treatment for respiratory allergies. In patients with uncontrolled optimal pharmacotherapy that induces undesirable adverse effects and in those who would benefit from immunotherapy and decline SCIT, SLIT should be considered.⁴¹ SCIT is indicated in AR and asthma.⁵² SCIT is also indicated in patients with a history of a systemic reaction to a *Hymenoptera* sting (especially if such a reaction is associated with respiratory symptoms, cardiovascular symptoms, or both), and there is demonstrable evidence of clinically relevant specific IgE antibodies.¹

CONTRAINDICATIONS

Partly controlled or uncontrolled asthma with forced expiratory volume in 1 second of <70% of normal despite adequate treatment is a contraindication for AIT. The other contraindications for immunotherapy are severe autoimmune diseases and immunodeficiency states.⁵³

CONCLUSION

The main mechanism of AIT is production of IgG in the serum and of IgG and IgA in nasal secretions. AIT also causes a decrease in specific IgE. Two main types of AIT are SCIT and SLIT. AIT can be administered to those patients who are >5 years of age and has been shown to be safe in children as young as 3 years of age.^{2,41–43} Due to the risk of anaphylaxis, SCIT should only be administered in a medical setting where anaphylaxis can be treated.

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