

How to deal with allergies

Allergic diseases are very common in Hong Kong. People can be allergic to certain substances, or allergens, such as pollens, dust mites, animal dander, and insect stings. After being exposed to the allergens, they may develop symptoms such as sneezing, runny nose and itchy eyes.

Identifying the allergens correctly is important for tackling the disease. Avoiding the allergens is a common practice. But it is impossible to escape from all of the allergens around us. Medications may help relieve some symptoms, but not all patients respond well to medication. When these treatments fail, allergen immunotherapy should be considered.

By injecting small amounts of allergen into the body and increasing the dosage gradually, allergen immunotherapy reduces the immune system's sensitivity so that it stops reacting strongly to the allergens. During the build-up phase, the injection is administered once or twice a week. The amount of allergen injected is increased over a period of 2 to 3 months. When the effective dosage is reached, the "maintenance" phase begins and the frequency of the injections is reduced to once every 4 weeks. A full course of treatment usually takes 3 to 5 years.

Immunotherapy is also effective in reducing the symptoms of allergic rhinitis (inflammation of the nose's mucous membrane), asthma and insect sting allergy. It continues to help the patient long after therapy is stopped. Recent studies also show immunotherapy works on some patients with atopic dermatitis (rash) and can even prevent new sensitivities and asthma from developing.