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The latest research on allergies: Specific immunotherapy can help

**Specific immune therapy works for many people and it is becoming increasingly popular in Europe, according to the German Institute for Quality and Efficiency in Health Care.**

**Cologne, 11 June 2008:** The German Institute for Quality and Efficiency in Health Care has assessed recent evidence on allergies. It found that the once controversial immune therapy against allergy symptoms can definitely help many people with allergies.

When it is green and the flowers have returned, the allergy season has hit its peak. And the number of people affected is still rising. At least 1 in 5 people in Germany get hay fever, and up to half of the population react at least sometimes to airborne allergens like pollen or house dust mites. But we still do not know why allergies increased so much in recent decades. The Director of the Institute, Professor Peter Sawicki, said today that none of the theories about the increase in allergies has been proven. For example, childhood immunisation does not seem to be responsible for the growth of allergies.

"There are many unproven claims about allergies," said Professor Sawicki, "but there is also a growing body of research that has sifted out some facts from the myths. For example, expensive and time-consuming effort like removing all carpets from the house or washing bedlinen very frequently will be a waste for most people: it really is not possible to remove all the allergens from the house, no matter how hard you try. But there are things that can work, like specific immune therapy. And a range of drugs can reduce symptoms."

The Institute has reviewed the latest independent analyses of allergy research to find out which treatments or prevention measures could really work. Allergen immunotherapy can be done by injections or sublingual ("under the tongue") drops, tablets or sprays. Both injections and sublingual treatments work. A report\* shows that more than a dozen of these immunotherapy extracts are now amongst the 3,000 most prescribed medicines in Germany.

According to Professor Sawicki, "Sublingual therapy in particular is becoming very popular in Europe. Research has shown that it can reduce allergic symptoms in adults and it causes less adverse reactions than injections. We are still not completely certain if it is as effective as injections, or whether it works for children. But many more trials are being done and we expect good answers to these questions soon."

In Germany, the use of anti-histamines has dropped greatly in recent years. The Institute also examined the latest research on some of the biggest-selling anti-histamines. They can all relieve symptoms, but adverse effects are common with all of them. Some might provide relief more quickly than others, and some might have more adverse effects.

The Institute also looked at what might work to prevent allergies developing in children and came to several conclusions. If the parents quit smoking, this can help. Some infant formulas can occasionally cause some allergies. And there are early signs that pregnant women taking probiotics late in pregnancy might be able to help.

"Probiotics in pregnancy is an area of research the Institute will continue to monitor, to see whether trials establish whether or not this can really prevent allergies," according to Professor Sawicki.

The Institute's website, Informed Health Online, informs the public in plain language about evidence and medical developments that would interest those affected. The information is in both English and German. The information released today reports on preventing allergies in children, specific immune therapy and some of the most commonly used anti-histamines. People who want to keep up with the latest publications on this independent publicly-funded website can subscribe to the free newsletter.

\*Schwabe U, Paffrath D, Arzneiverordnungs-Report 2007. Heidelberg: Springer Medizin Verlag 2008.

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## Glossary

### evidence

Evidence is what we call scientific proof from well-conducted, good-quality scientific trials that have been carefully designed to answer specific questions. Depending on the types of questions, different scientific research methods (types of study) are most appropriate to find reliable answers to these questions. Randomized controlled trials (RCTs), for example, are the best way to get reliable evidence on the effectiveness of medical treatments (interventions). This type of study, however, is not the best form of evidence for all possible questions, and does not provide the best answers to all kinds of questions, either. Epidemiological studies, for example, are very suitable for establishing well-founded proof for the spreading of a disease in the population.

### allergy

An allergy is the body's overly sensitive reaction to a foreign substance. The body produces antibodies just as it would if the substance were a germ, although it is not dangerous to the body. The symptoms of the allergy partly depend on the substance causing it, the allergen. People with allergies often have symptoms like running nose, watery eyes, itching, rashes, stomach and bowel problems or asthma. Typical allergens are pollen, animal hair, proteins in certain food or house dust mite excrement.

**Sources**

## **The German Institute for Quality and Efficiency in Health Care (IQWiG)**

The German Institute for Quality and Efficiency in Health Care (IQWiG) was established by legislation to provide evaluations of the effectiveness, quality and efficiency of healthcare services. This includes the assessment of medicines as well as the publication of health information for consumers and patients.

## **Evidence basis of our health information**

Our information is based primarily on systematic reviews of the effects of health care. Systematic reviews are necessary to gain an objective picture of health care. In order to do this, a clear question is formulated. Researchers then find all the relevant studies that could answer this question. They then evaluate those studies.

You can find a list of the evidence and other scientific literature on which this information is based at [\*\*www.informedhealthonline.org\*\*](http://www.informedhealthonline.org)

## **Disclaimer**

This information was prepared and published by the German Institute for Quality and Efficiency in Health Care (IQWiG). It is based on the evidence and other scientific literature available at the time of publication. The information is intended for the use of patients in Germany. It is not intended to for use to diagnose illnesses and the information is not intended to substitute for medical advice.