

Allergy-fighter Tunitas seeks \$2M

Tunitas Therapeutics Inc. is getting a shot at heading off asthma and a wide range of allergies. Now it just needs more money.

The early-stage company, funded entirely on grants to date, is prepping its first bi-functional fusion protein — a genetically engineered combo of two antibody fragments — aimed at preventing peanuts or cats, for example, from tripping the body's allergy response system. Tunitas hopes to take its lead drug into a clinical trial next year.

Based in the Mission Bay Innovation Center in the FibroGen building in San Francisco, six-person Tunitas faces a crowded field of asthma drug developers. But President and CEO Dr. Nolan Sigal said its strength is its underlying technology, developed by Dr. Andrew Saxon, the former chief of clinical immunology and allergy at the UCLA School of Medicine.

Saxon is Tunitas' acting chief scientific officer.

Allergy-mediating cells in many peoples' lungs, gastrointestinal tracts and skin are preloaded with a specific antibody called Immunoglobulin E, or IgE. As soon as those cells come into contact with an allergen, IgE triggers the allergic cell. But Tunitas' lead compound, called GE2, is designed to send its signal first, telling the cell not to activate its emergency system.

"It's more upstream," Sigal said.

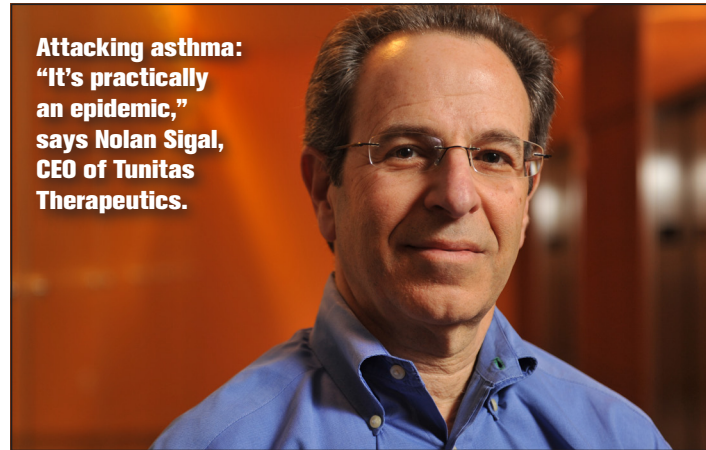
GE2 ultimately could be injected once a month or every other month to stop asthma or cut off allergic reactions, Sigal said.

Meanwhile, asthma, GE2's first target, is well controlled with oral or inhaled steroids and other drugs, such as Genentech Inc.'s injectable Xolair.

Xolair sales hit \$1 billion in sales in 2010.

Still, certain populations don't respond well to some asthma drugs, and Sigal said each day 40,000 people in the United States miss work or school due to asthma attacks — and 11 people die.

**Attacking asthma:
"It's practically
an epidemic,"
says Nolan Sigal,
CEO of Tunitas
Therapeutics.**



SPENCER BROWN

"It's practically an epidemic," said Sigal, the former head of immunology research at Merck & Co. "This is a huge problem and a lot of people aren't controlled with inhalers. It really affects their lives."

Tunitas has raised about \$10 million in grants from the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Disease and the Immune Tolerance Network that cover Tunitas' programs in asthma, cat allergy and peanut allergy. About \$3.5 million of that has been spent. Tunitas has not taken any venture or angel investor cash.

As a more capital-intensive human clinical trial nears and NIAID money can't be spent on a trial, Sigal said, Tunitas over the next six months will seek to raise about \$2 million. "That's in the range of angel and seed-stage investors," Sigal said.