

Tips for overcoming needle phobia

Most people don't particularly like having injections. But for some, just the thought of needles can be extremely anxiety-inducing. Sometimes, a fear of needles can cause us to avoid medical procedures that we might otherwise want or need.

This resource explains more about needle phobia and provides some tips and tools to help you or a loved one overcome it.

What is needle phobia?

Needle phobia, also known as trypanophobia, is a fear of medical procedures that involve needles or injections. Needle phobia affects at least one in 10 people - it is very common and nothing to be ashamed of. Thankfully, there are lots of simple exercises and strategies to help you face your fear of needles.

Tips to help reduce your fear of needles

There are lots of different reasons why someone might develop a fear of needles, and so there is no one-size-fits-all when it comes to things that can help. Below are a few tips and strategies you might like to try the next time you need a vaccine or injection. Be patient with yourself, give them a go and see what works for you.

Control what you can

If having more control over the situation helps to ease your anxiety, talk to a loved one or healthcare provider about the things you can do in advance to prepare for your injection. Plan ahead by booking your appointment and marking it in the calendar, and take the day off if possible so you can relax afterwards. You might like to ask your healthcare provider any questions you have about the procedure in advance and write the answers down so you don't have to process the information on the day. If you can, book your appointment for the morning so you don't have to spend the day worrying about it.

Alternatively, some people feel more anxious if they have an appointment booked in advance, and would prefer not to have a long lead-in time. If this is you, in some circumstances, such as vaccinations or blood tests, walk-in appointments are available. These may be a good option so you can visit on a day you're feeling confident.



You can also ring your local pharmacy or lab ahead of time and find out when the quietest time of day is to save waiting in a queue. You can find out how to book a vaccination [here](#), and your GP or Healthline can help you to find where to get a blood test.



Have support people with you

You don't have to face your fear of needles alone. Let your friends and whānau know how you're feeling and talk about how they can best support you. You could have someone organise your appointment for you, drive you there and sit with you during the injection. You might also like to connect with others who have needle phobia too, and even book and receive your vaccinations at the same time as someone else so you can help each other tackle your fears together.

Be open about your worries with your healthcare provider

Healthcare workers see people with needle phobias all the time. Be honest with them about how you're feeling so they can do their best to make the process easier for you. Ask them questions and let them know what your worries are – chatting with them can be a good distraction, too. They will not judge you or be annoyed, they are there to keep you safe and want to make the experience as stress-free as possible for you.

Practise breathing exercises

It's useful to have some tricks up your sleeve that you know calm you down when you're in a situation that makes you anxious. Taking deep, slow breaths is proven to calm the nervous system and make us feel less anxious in times of stress. Before your appointment, practise this breathing exercise specifically developed by the NHS in the UK for people with needle phobias:

- Sit in a comfortable position, with your back upright but not stiff.
- Let your shoulders and jaw relax. Put one hand low down on your belly.
- Take a long, slow, deep, gentle breath in through your nose and out through your mouth. Try to breathe right down into your belly, but don't force it. Just let your body breathe as deeply as is comfortable for you. Do this for five breaths.
- If possible, practise this exercise three times every day for a week, before heading to your appointment.

Find ways to distract yourself

We know it's difficult, but try your best not to focus on the needle itself. Most people find it best not to look at the needle during the procedure. Bring a support person with you who can hold your hand and chat to you during the appointment, put headphones in and play a song you love, or bring along a fidget toy or a stress-ball that you can squeeze.



Some labs and vaccination locations also offer 'buzzy bees', a small device that vibrates and has a cold pack on it. It attaches to your arm and distracts your nerves through its temperature and movement while you receive your vaccine. Talk to your vaccinator if you think a buzzy bee would be useful for you or a loved one. These can be particularly helpful for children and those with sensory disorders, too.

Remind yourself it will be over quickly

Try to remind yourself that injections only last for a few seconds, and the pain is generally very minimal. Vaccinations are particularly manageable – they are significantly quicker and less painful than other needle procedures. In fact, many people report barely feeling their flu shot or other vaccination at all.

Be proud of yourself and remember why you're doing this

It takes courage to face your fears and you should be proud of yourself for taking steps to overcome them. Remember that getting an injection only lasts for a few seconds, but the procedure can go a long way in taking care of and protecting your health. If it's a vaccine, you're helping to protect those around you, too. Take some time to reflect on why you think it's important to get the injection or vaccine you're needing, and keep reminding yourself of this on the day.



Further options you might like to look into:

- EMLA cream is an anaesthetic agent used for adults and children over three months of age for procedures involving needles. It must be applied to the skin at least sixty minutes before a procedure. If your fears are around the pain of the injection, talk to your healthcare professional about whether this could be an appropriate option for you.
- If you are worried about having a panic attack or fainting, speak to your healthcare professional about requesting a private room with a bed so you can have some privacy, and lie down afterwards if you'd like to.
- Low sensory clinics for vaccinations are sometimes offered throughout the country. These clinics have minimal lighting, people and noise, and are designed to make the experience as relaxing as possible. Phone Healthline on 0800 611 116 and ask to speak to someone in the Disability support team that can give you information on accessible or low sensory clinics in your local area.

Remember – needle phobia is very common, and there are plenty of people who want to help you face your fears so you can receive the healthcare you deserve. For further support and advice, you can free call the Anxiety NZ helpline on 0800 269 4389 or Healthline on 0800 611 116.

References

NRHCC (Northern Region Health Co-ordination Centre)
About phobias – Mental Health Foundation
Fear of needles and injections – Healthify NZ
Overcoming your needle phobia (fear of needles) NHS, UK
www.youtube.com/watch?v=xejjVE1GuIA, Ministry of Health