

# Overcoming your needle phobia (fear of needles)

**This leaflet explains more about needle phobia and provides practical advice on how to overcome it. If you have any questions or concerns, please speak to your vaccinator.**

## What is needle phobia?

Needle phobia is a fear of medical procedures that involve needles or injections. It is very common, affecting at least one in 10 people, and is nothing to be ashamed of. Fortunately, simple exercises and practice can help to overcome it.

Many patients with needle phobia may have had a lot of blood tests or procedures as a child. A fear of needles and injections often, but not always, results from bad memories of needles earlier in life.

## What are the signs and symptoms?

For many people, fear of needles is linked to fainting or feeling faint. When the fear is triggered (for example by seeing blood, or thinking about an injection), heart rate and blood pressure increase (as with other kinds of fears), but then rapidly drop. It is this fall in blood pressure that can cause fainting.

Many people do not confront their fear because they are embarrassed. Other people do not feel faint or actually faint, but do feel panicky when their fear is triggered.

## What can I do to overcome my fear of needles?

There are a number of things you can do to help overcome your fear.

- Tell the person who is coordinating your care, giving you your injection or doing a blood test about your worries. They may be able to answer any specific questions you have, and help you cope with the procedure, for example by chatting to distract you. Don't worry, staff looking after you will not be annoyed or think you are a wimp when you tell them – they would like to know so that they can help to make it easier for you.
- Think about whether there has been anything which has helped you to cope with needles in the past. Can you use something like this to help you again?
- If your fear is linked to fainting, or feeling faint, you can learn an applied tension technique (see the next section for more information).
- If you feel panicky (for example your heart races, your chest feels tight and your stomach churns), but you do not feel faint, you can learn a breathing for relaxation exercise (see the next section for more information).

These exercises are safe in pregnancy and with most medical conditions.

Remember, the needle will not be unbearably painful. It will hurt a little but there are things you can do to help with feeling anxious, such as distracting your thoughts and using relaxation techniques.

## Is there anything I can do to help myself?

### Applied tension

Applied tension is a simple technique to increase blood pressure back to normal levels so that you do not faint.

This is how you do it.

- 1 Sit down somewhere comfortable.
- 2 Tense the muscles in your arms, upper body and legs, and hold this tension for 10 to 15 seconds, or until you start to feel the warmth rising in your face.
- 3 Release the tension and go back to your normal sitting position.
- 4 After about 20 to 30 seconds, go through the tension procedure again until you feel the warmth in your face.
- 5 Repeat this sequence so that you have practised the tension five times.

If you can, practise this sequence three times every day for about a week, before moving on to facing your fear.

If you get headaches after doing this exercise, take care not to tense the muscles in your face and head. Also, be careful when tensing any part of your body where you have any health problems.

### Breathing for relaxation

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 moving on facing your fear.

### Final steps: facing your fear

Once you have mastered the above exercises, the next step is to start to face your fear of needles. It is important to take one small step at a time! Develop a 'fear ladder' – a list of all of the situations related to needles which you fear, arranged in order of difficulty. Put the easier ones at the bottom – like the first rung of the ladder. This might include thinking about procedures involving needles, seeing pictures of them, watching them on TV and in real life, and actually having them done.

Rate each situation on a scale 0 to 10, where 10 is the most difficult and 0 is the easiest. There is an example of a fear ladder on the next page.

Situations	Distress rating
Having an injection in my arm	10/10
Holding a needle	9/10
Touching a needle	8/10
Watching someone else having an injection in real life	8/10
Watching someone having an injection on TV or online	7/10
Looking at photos of injections	6/10
Listening to someone talking about having an injection	6/10
Thinking about having an injection	5/10

### Tips on creating your fear ladder

To climb your fear ladder you will have to think about, or act out, each step so try to include some situations which are not too difficult. These are the ones you will start with. Think about what makes a difference to how difficult a situation is. For example, you might find it easier to look at a picture of a smaller needle than of a large one.

### Tips on climbing your fear ladder

- 1 Start with the least difficult item (for example thinking about having an injection, in the table above).
- 2 Plan enough time so that you can stay with the fear long enough to feel your anxiety peak, stay on that level for a while, then gradually reduce. Staying with the fear allows you to see how anxiety makes you feel. Remember that anxiety drops on its own over time.
- 3 Begin to use the applied tension or breathing exercise.
- 4 Go into the feared situation, and stay with it until your anxiety has started to drop.
- 5 Take some time to relax, perhaps using the breathing exercise.
- 6 When you feel confident with one situation, move up to the next step of the ladder. You may need to practise with one situation a few times before you are ready to move on to the next one.

Overcoming your fear will take some time and practice, but it will make life less stressful and you will feel less anxious.

## Key points

- Don't be ashamed of being scared of injections – you are not alone.
- Tell health professionals about your worries.
- Think about what helps.
- Learn applied tension technique if you faint or feel very faint, or breathing for relaxation exercise if you feel panicky.
- Overcome your fear one step at a time

