Overcoming your fear of needles

This leaflet explains more about the fear of needles and provides practical advice on how to overcome it.

What is needle phobia?

Needle phobia, also known as a fear of needles, 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 will 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 worried they may embarrass or hurt themselves through fainting. 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 may also be able to 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 very 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. Read on for tips and hints!

**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 you are comfortable.
2. Tense the muscles in your arms, upper body and legs, and hold this tension for about 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 again to the next step, which is facing your fear. This will help you to build your confidence in using the sequence and increasing your blood pressure. It will take about five minutes on each occasion so it may be helpful to think ahead and plan for when you are likely to have a few spare minutes to do it.

If you get headaches after doing this exercise, take care not to tense the muscles in your face and head. Also, do go gently 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 to the next step, which is facing your fear. This will help you to build your confidence in doing the exercise and using it to relax. It will take less than five minutes on each occasion so it may be helpful to think ahead and plan for when you are likely to have a few spare minutes to do it.

**Final steps: facing your fear**
Once you have mastered the applied tension technique or breathing for relaxation exercise, 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 not difficult at all. Here is an example of fear ladder:

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

**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 small needle than of a large one.

**Tips on climbing your fear ladder**

1. Start with the least difficult item at the bottom of the ladder (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 technique or breathing for relaxation exercise, as you have been practising.

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 for relaxation 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 in the long run, 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.

Contact us

If you have any questions or concerns about your fear of needles, please speak to the staff caring for you.

Pharmacy Medicines Helpline
If you have any questions or concerns about your medicines, please speak to the staff caring for you or call our helpline.
t: 020 7188 8748 9am to 5pm, Monday to Friday

Patient Advice and Liaison Service (PALS)
To make comments or raise concerns about the Trust’s services, please contact PALS. Ask a member of staff to direct you to the PALS office or:
t: 020 7188 8801 at St Thomas’  t: 020 7188 8803 at Guy’s  e: pals@gstt.nhs.uk

Knowledge & Information Centre (KIC)
For more information about health conditions, support groups and local services, or to search the internet and send emails, please visit the KIC on the Ground Floor, North Wing, St Thomas’ Hospital.
t: 020 7188 3416

Language Support Services
If you need an interpreter or information about your care in a different language or format, please get in touch using the following contact details.
t: 020 7188 8815  fax: 020 7188 5953

NHS Choices
Provides online information and guidance on all aspects of health and healthcare, to help you make choices about your health.
w: www.nhs.uk

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