Addressing Vaccination Anxiety in Adolescents and Adults:

Strategies for Healthcare Professionals



Anxiety about injections is common among adolescents and adults, and can contribute to dreading, delaying, or even refusing vaccination. However, anxiety and pain are subjective feelings: what you do and say can help an anxious patient gain confidence and more readily accept vaccinations in the future.

Below are strategies that can improve the vaccination experience for adolescents and adults. Consider what is practical. Simply acknowledging the patient's feelings and letting them know you care can help.

Before the Visit

Pre-registration may minimize time in the waiting room where anxiety can mount.

Establish expectations. If possible, let patients know they will be offered any needed vaccinations and that you'll work with them to make the experience comfortable.

Set up the vaccination room/area so it's comfortable and private. Keep needles out of sight until necessary.

Consider topical analgesia (e.g., 5% lidocaine cream, spray, or patch). This may help with pain but needs to be applied to the vaccination site 30 to 60 minutes ahead of time. With guidance, some patients may accomplish this before arriving.[1]

During the Visit

Screen for vaccination-related anxiety. Immunize.org's screening checklists for contraindications to vaccines now ask about anxiety.[2]

Invite patients to ask questions about the vaccination process so they feel prepared.

Watch your words! Use words that help the patient cope during vaccination. Using fear-provoking words (e.g., "shot," "sting") or false reassurances ("It won't hurt a bit") can increase distress and pain.

Ask each patient what helps them feel comfortable. Make suggestions, if needed. Slow deep breaths can be calming. A lot of people like to be distracted (some don't) and they can be encouraged to chat or use their mobile devices. Posters can serve as distractions, too. Offer pain management options, if feasible (see below).

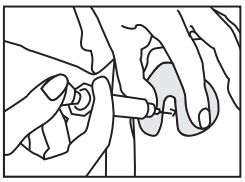
KEY IDEA:

Asking patients how they prefer to manage their anxiety is essential.

CONTINUED ON THE NEXT PAGE ►

Provided by GSK.
Adapted from https:/www.immunize.org/wp-content/uploads/catg.d/p4270.pdf on 03/03/2026. We thank Immunize.org.

Non-pharmacological Pain Management Options (to minimize pain signals from the skin)



Cooling the injection site with a vapocoolant spray immediately before injection.

Using injection techniques that diminish the pain experience: Don't aspirate before intramuscular injections. Inject quickly. If giving multiple injections, give the most painful vaccine last.

Placing a vibrating case with optional ice pack proximal to the injection site (closer to the trunk).

Placing a plastic device with several short, blunt contact points on the patient's skin before injection. These are non-prescription, inexpensive and can be cleaned and reused.

After the Visit

Use of pain-reducing medicines (e.g., ibuprofen or acetaminophen) before vaccination is not recommended because it might diminish the immune system's response to vaccination. They may be used to treat pain or fever after vaccination.

For more information, see Immunize.org's resources on Addressing Vaccination Anxiety, available at www.immunize.org/handouts.

1. *Guide to Topical Anesthetics and Numbing Cream* from the Meg Foundation at www.megfoundationforpain.org/2022/7/22/topical-anesthetics-infographic/
2. Screening Checklists about Vaccine Contraindications and Precautions from Immunize.org at www.immunize.org/clinic/screening-contraindications.asp
3. *Improving the Vaccination Experience: What Health-Care Providers Say* from AboutKidsHealth (Canada) at assets.aboutkidshealth.ca/AKHassets/CARD_HCP_ WhatYouCanSay.pdf?hub=cardcommvac#card

Provided by GSK.
Adapted from https:/www.immunize.org/wp-content/uploads/catg.d/p4270.pdf on 03/03/2026. We thank Immunize.org.
Trademarks are property of their respective owners.

©2026 GSK or licensor.
NPUS-AVULBND260023 May 2026
Produced in USA.