Addressing Vaccination Anxiety for Children

Strategies for Vaccine Recipients and Caregivers



Anxiety about injections is a common feeling for people of all ages, especially children. This may lead some children to dread or avoid vaccination, even when they understand why vaccines are important. You can help your child have a better vaccination visit while you help protect them from serious diseases. For medical advice, please talk to your doctor.

Before the Visit

- **Pre-register** for your visit, if possible, so your wait time is shorter.
- **Know what to expect.** When setting up the visit, ask if vaccinations are expected. Do not reassure your child falsely. For example, don't promise "only one shot today" in case you find out later that your child needs more.
- **Consider a numbing medicine that you can put on the skin.** It may be a 5% lidocaine cream, spray, or patch. This can help with injection pain. To take effect, these medicines need to be put on the skin 30 to 60 minutes ahead of time. Many clinics do not have time to do this. Consider asking the clinic or a pharmacist how to do this before you arrive, using a numbing medicine you can get without a prescription.[1]

During the Visit[2]

- **Ask questions** about the vaccination process so you and your child feel prepared.
- It's important that you or your child **let the person giving the vaccines know** if the child is anxious and what helps them feel better. For example, are they calmer sitting on a parent's lap or alone?
- **Distract them:** Most children prefer to be distracted during vaccination. Let them play with a mobile device or toy, or sing. They might talk about something else, or look through a fun book.
- **Help the child relax.** Guide the child to take some slow, deep breaths before, during, and after vaccination.
- **Your words, tone, and attitude are important.** The child getting the vaccine will be reassured if you are calm and positive. On the other hand, using fear-provoking words (like 'shot' or 'sting') or giving false reassurances ("I promise it won't hurt a bit") can increase distress and pain.[3]

KEY IDEA

Let the person giving the vaccines know if your child is anxious and what helps them feel calmer. They want to help!

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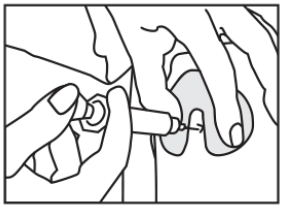
Options for Making Shots Less Painful without Medicine

In addition to numbing medicines described above, there are other ways to "distract" the pain sensors in the skin so the child getting the vaccine won't notice it as much. Options include:

- **The person giving the vaccine may apply a cold ("freezy") spray** just before injection.
- A **vibrating case with optional ice pack** may be held against the shoulder or thigh, above the spot where the injection will be given.
- Before the injection, a **plastic device with several short, blunt contact points** can be placed on the skin around the injection site (an example is pictured at right). This is non-prescription and inexpensive. You can clean and reuse it.



After the Visit

- Experts do not recommend pain medicines (such as ibuprofen or acetaminophen) before vaccination because they might lower the body's response to vaccines. You may use these medicines to help with pain or fever that develops after vaccination, if needed.[4]

References: 1. *Guide to Topical Anesthetics and Numbing Cream* from the Meg Foundation at www.megfoundationforpain.org/2022/7/22/topical-anesthetics-infographic/ **2.** *Reduce the Pain of Vaccination in Kids and Teens: A Guide for Parents* from Immunize Canada: https://caringforkids.cps.ca/uploads/handout_images/Pain-reduction-kids-and-teens.pdf **3.** *Improving the Vaccination Experience: What Health-Care Providers Say* from AboutKidsHealth (Canada) at assets.aboutkidshealth.ca/AKHassets/CARD_HCP_WhatYouCanSay.pdf?hub=cardcomwhatcard **4.** *After the Shots: What to do if your child has discomfort* (Immunize.org): www.immunize.org/catg.d/p4015.pdf

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