Addressing Vaccination Anxiety for Infants and Toddlers

Strategies for Healthcare Professionals



Distress and fear of injections is common among infants and toddlers, and can cause parents to dread, delay, or even refuse vaccination. Below are strategies that can improve the vaccination experience, especially when combined. Consider what is practical. Simply acknowledging the feelings of both parent and child and letting them know you care can help.

Before the Visit

- **Have the family bring a comforting or distracting item** from home (e.g., blanket, musical toy). If not breastfeeding, the family can bring a bottle or a pacifier.
- **Consider topical analgesia** (e.g., 5% lidocaine cream, spray, or patch). This may help with pain but needs to be applied to the vaccination sites 30 to 60 minutes ahead of time. With guidance, some parents may accomplish this before arriving.[1]

During the Visit

- **Ask the parent** how the child handles vaccinations.[2] What helps?
- **Invite the parent to ask** about the vaccination process so they feel prepared.
- Remind parents that their **actions and tone of voice** influence their child, as do those of the medical team. If the adults act and speak calmly and confidently, the child will feel reassured.
- **Distraction helps most** infants and toddlers. Parents may use a mobile device, toys, or music to entertain the child.
- **Watch your words!** Using fear-provoking words (e.g., 'shot', 'sting') as well as false reassurances (“It won’t hurt a bit”) may increase the child’s distress and pain.[3]
- **Have the parent hold the child.** After undressing the baby’s limb(s) where the vaccine(s) will be given, have the parent hold the child on their lap (facing away from parent) or hug the child (facing the parent) during the vaccination. This should help the child stay still and feel secure but should not be so tight that holding increases distress. The child may be rocked after vaccination.
- **Breastfeeding, taking sugar water, or sucking on a pacifier** while being held helps with pain. If breastfeeding, sucking before, during, and after vaccination is ideal. If not breast-feeding: the parent may start giving sugar water 1 to 2 minutes before vaccination.[4] The sugar water may be given by placing a dropper or syringe into the side of the child’s mouth between the cheek and gums or dipping a pacifier into the sugar water before giving it.

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Non-pharmacological Pain Management Options

In addition to topical analgesics (see previous page), non-pharmacological pain control strategies that temporarily "confuse and distract" pain sensors are quick and effective for many. Options include:

- **Cooling the injection site** with a vapocoolant spray immediately before injection.
- **Using pain-minimizing injection techniques:** Don't aspirate before injecting. Inject quickly. If giving multiple injections, give the most painful vaccine last.
- **Have the parent hold the child.** After undressing the baby's limb(s) where the vaccine(s) will be given, have the parent hold the child on their lap (facing away from parent) or hug the child (facing the parent) during the vaccination. This should help the child stay still and feel secure but should not be so tight that holding increases distress. The child may be rocked after vaccination.
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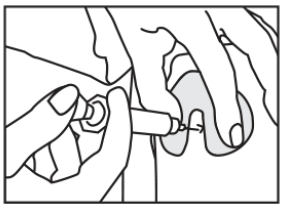
- **Placing a plastic device with several short, blunt contact points** (an example is pictured on the right) on the patient's skin before injection. These are non-prescription, inexpensive and can be cleaned and reused. If they work well, the family may keep one for future vaccinations.



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. These medicines may be used as needed to treat pain or fever after vaccination.

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 Children Under 3 Years: A Guide for Parents* from Immunize Canada: https://caringforkids.cps.ca/uploads/handout_images/3p_babiesto1yr_e.pdf **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 **4.** To make sugar water, mix 1 teaspoon of white sugar with 2 teaspoons of distilled or boiled water (if younger than 3 months). For babies more than age 6 months, tap water may be used.

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