Addressing Vaccination Anxiety in Adolescents and Adults:

Strategies for Vaccine Recipients and Caregivers



Anxiety about injections is common for people of all ages, including adolescents and adults. Some feel so anxious that they dread, delay, or even avoid vaccination…even when they know vaccines are important. You can do simple things to make yourself (or the person you are with) feel better about the vaccination visit while being protected from serious, vaccine-preventable diseases.

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. If you are a caregiver of an anxious person, do not reassure them falsely. For example, don't promise "no shots today" in case their healthcare provider recommends that they need one or more vaccinations.

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

Ask questions about the vaccination process so you feel prepared.

Tell the person vaccinating you what helps you feel better. Do you prefer sitting (most do) or lying down? Do you prefer to look away or to watch what is happening?

Relax. For example, taking a few slow deep breaths before, during, and after vaccination can be calming.

Distract. Most people prefer to be distracted during vaccination. Consider using an app or game on your mobile device or simply talking about something else.

(For caregivers) **Your words, tone, and attitude are important.** The person getting the vaccine will be less anxious if you act calm, positive, and confident. On the other hand, using fear-provoking words (like "shot" or "sting") or giving false reassurances ("I promise it won't hurt a bit") may increase distress and pain.[2]

KEY IDEA:

Let the person vaccinating you know if you are anxious and what helps you feel calmer. They want to help!

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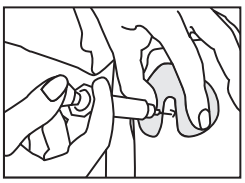
Options for Making Shots Less Painful Without Medicine



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

Cooling the injection site. The person giving the vaccine may use a "freezing" spray just before injection.

A **vibrating case with optional ice pack** can be held against the shoulder or thigh above the injection site.

Before the injection, **a plastic device** with several short, blunt contact points can be **placed on the skin around the injection site**. This is non-prescription and inexpensive. It can be cleaned and reused.

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.

1. Guide to Topical Anesthetics and Numbing Cream from the Meg Foundation at www.megfoundationforpain.org/2022/7/22/topical-anesthetics-infographic/

2. Improving the Vaccination Experience: What Health-Care Providers Say from AboutKidsHealth (Canada) at assets.aboutkidshealth.ca/AKHassets/CARD_HCP_WhatYouCanSay.pdf?hub=cardcommvac#card

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NPUS-AVULBND260020 May 2026
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