

Fear of Needles and the COVID-19 Vaccine: A Guide for Professionals When Working with People with Disabilities

Needle hesitancy varies among people, with the most extreme cases being those with Trypanophobia (fear of needles). About 25% of adults have a fear of needles and will avoid medical care because of this. These rates of may be higher for people with disabilities for many reasons including:

- Not understanding why they need to get the procedure
- Increased sensitivity to physical pain
- Increased emotional stress or anxiety

It may be necessary to provide additional support to patients with disabilities and involve their caregivers to ensure that they are able to get the medical procedure.



Tips For Helping People with Disabilities

- Validate their fears, listen to their concerns, and provide support.
- Help them understand why they need the medical procedure and how it helps them stay healthy.
- Allow extra time for the appointment. Feeling rushed can increase anxiety.
- Explain exactly what you will be doing step-by-step *before* you do each step. For example, “I am going to clean your arm with this alcohol swab. It may feel cold, but it will not hurt.”
- Some patients may not feel comfortable or tolerate being touched. Continue to explain the process and provide reassurance and ask the caregiver for help, if needed.
- Help keep your patient distracted by engaging in conversation.
- Walk your patient through breathing exercises.
- Offer local numbing agents.
- Do not force or restrain the patient.
- In some cases, patients may benefit from medications that help them relax and ease anxiety.
- If your patient has extreme levels of fear, support them to seek cognitive behavioral or exposure therapy *before* their appointment.



Tips for Helping Caregivers

- Discuss needle fears before the patient's appointment.
- Encourage caregivers to explain the procedure with the patient and prepare them before the appointment.
- Provide resources such as social stories, techniques, and strategies that can be used to prepare the patient for the procedure.
- Encourage the caregiver to arrive early to ensure plenty of time to help calm the patient.
- Some medications may help ease anxiety. Talk to the caregiver and the patient to determine if using medication would help the patient. People with disabilities may have adverse reactions to different medications.
- Refer patients to cognitive-behavioral and exposure therapy to address extreme fear and anxiety.



Deep Breathing Techniques

You can support people with disabilities by teaching them how to practice deep breathing using the steps below. Understand that some people may not be able to take deep breaths or feel their body expand; offer these people the option to calm down in other ways such as picturing a place where they feel happy.

1. Sit in a comfortable position
2. Relax your body
3. Close your eyes if you can and are comfortable
4. If you can, put one hand on your belly
5. Take a long, deep breath in through your nose, and out through your mouth
6. Try to breathe deep so you can feel your belly expand
7. Do this for a few minutes or until you feel calm



Some people might find it helpful to be distracted during the process. Some options include

- Carrying on a conversation
- Listening to music
- Bringing a book to read or playing game on a phone
- Playing with a fidget toy



Resources

- Vibrating toy to help distract from or decrease pain. BUZZY Device is a well known example of this type of product: www.paincarelabs.com/buzzy
- **Deep Breathing Techniques:** Provided by the University of Michigan. Step-by-step instructions on how to practice deep breathing. www.uofmhealth.org/health-library/u72255
- **CDC Vaccine Administration Information:** www.cdc.gov/vaccines/pubs/pinkbook/vac-admin.html - Reference guide for medical providers to help prepare before administering injections.
- **Needle Fear Infographics (English & Spanish Versions):** www.pphc.uoguelph.ca/needle-fear-resources/ - Helpful visual tool and resource guide to provide support for those with a fear of needles.
- **Voxel Bay:** Immersive virtual reality game used by hospitals and clinics to help provide distraction when administering injections. www.littleseed.io/voxelbay/