

Having a blood test or cannula

Information for patients, parents and guardians



As part of their hospital treatment, children are often required to have a blood test or cannula (tiny plastic tube inserted into a vein). This booklet explains the process so that you and your child both know what to expect. It contains practical advice to help you prepare your child and tips for distracting them during the event.

Many children and their parents feel anxious at the thought of having a blood test or cannula. Children can very easily pick up on their parents' feelings and reactions to a stressful situation. If you are able to remain outwardly calm and relaxed, it will help your child to feel calm and relaxed too. This can be easier said than done, but finding out what will happen and why, and planning how you and your child will cope in advance can help to reduce any anxiety or worry.

If you feel unable to accompany your child during the procedure

If you feel your own anxiety is overwhelming it may be better for your child to have someone else with them during the procedure instead. If you have to come alone with your child then a member of the nursing staff or a play specialist may be able to help. If you would like to discuss this please contact the ward your child is coming to.



What's the difference between a blood test and a cannula?

Blood test

A blood test involves using a fine needle to take a sample of blood for testing in a laboratory. Blood samples from children are usually taken from the back of the hand.

Cannula

A cannula is a small tube that's placed into a vein on the back of the hand or lower arm. It can be used to give medicine straight into a vein.

Understanding what will happen

- When you come for your appointment, one of the healthcare team will discuss with you the options for numbing your child's skin.
- The doctor, nurse or phlebotomist (person who is specially trained to take blood samples) will talk to you about what is going to happen.
- Your child will be able to sit on your lap, or beside you for the procedure.

- Once the needle or cannula is removed, a plaster or dressing swab will be applied. Please tell us if your child has any allergies to plasters or tapes.

Numbing the skin

Before your child has their blood test, we can offer the following options to numb their skin in order to reduce any pain or discomfort:

- children over one year of age: numbing cream (Ametop/EMLA) or cold spray (ethyl chloride)
- children between one month and one year of age: numbing cream (Ametop/EMLA)
- babies under one month old: talk to a member of the nursing team for more information

Numbing cream

Numbing cream is used to numb the surface of the skin. It's applied to the skin and covered with a clear dressing which is left on for up to 30 minutes, leaving the skin numb for up to six hours. The cream may make the skin go slightly red but this doesn't usually last long.

Cold spray

Cold spray is applied to the skin immediately before the blood test. It feels very cold and can help to reduce any discomfort that may be felt. If your child is over one year of age, you can choose whether they have numbing cream or cold spray. If you would prefer them to have numbing cream, speak to a member of the nursing team so that it can be applied and have time to work before your child has their blood test.

If your child has eczema, dermatitis or sensitivity to Ametop/EMLA, please speak to a member of the nursing team.

Preparing your child for their procedure

You can help prepare your child in different ways depending upon their age and understanding.

What to say

For most children, it's helpful to talk to them before they come into hospital, giving a simple, honest and reassuring explanation for what is going to happen. If you haven't already discussed the blood test, try to do so at least a day or two before coming to hospital. It often helps to encourage your child to talk about what will happen and ask questions.

Explain why they need the procedure

If your child has questions, try to answer them honestly in a calm voice, using words such as pinch/prick/sting/hurt a little. Avoid saying "you won't feel anything" or "it won't hurt at all".

It can be helpful to give your child some control over events by letting them choose what they would like to take into hospital: a favourite toy, storybook, or video game for example. Encouraging younger children to play with a teddy or doll and toy doctor's set or plasters and bandages can also be helpful.

Reacting to your child's emotions

Let your child know it's OK to not like what is happening. Allow them to cry and express their feelings and anxieties, but keep outwardly calm. Acknowledge their fears whilst letting them know that afterwards they will be OK.

Developing a plan

Developing a plan for what will happen during the procedure, and role-playing or practicing their coping strategy in advance (see next page) can help your child feel more in control and less frightened.

Talk to your child and let them decide in advance if they would like to:

- sit on your lap or not
- hold your hand
- count to three
- watch the blood test/or not watch
- take slow, deep breaths in and out
- sing a song
- squeeze a stress ball
- look at a book
- stay still like a 'statue'

Rewards

Often the person taking the blood will give stickers/presents. It may also help to suggest doing something nice or offer a treat afterwards.

Relaxation and distraction techniques

Research shows that using relaxation and distraction techniques can be very helpful for coping with medical procedures. The following techniques may be helpful, depending on your child's age:

Toddlers aged one to two years: distraction with bubbles, toys with lights or noises, videos or music can all work well.

Children three to five years: bring your child's favourite toy into hospital to hold during the procedure. Bubbles, toys with lights and noises and 'search and find' books can be helpful.

Children six to twelve years: toys that light up may still help this age group, as well as videos, music and 'search and find' books. Favourite soft toys or other favourite toys can also help.

Blowing bubbles can also help distract older children; deep breathing while blowing bubbles can help with relaxation.

Older children and teenagers: techniques suitable for this age group can include breathing slowly whilst relaxing muscles and counting. Older children can also use their imagination to help distract them; get your child to close their eyes and imagine a favourite place or activity. Telling stories or jokes may also help.

Key points to remember

- It's normal for children and parents to feel anxious about blood tests and other procedures.
- It can be tempting to avoid talking about a future visit to hospital before it happens, but planning a coping strategy in advance will help you and your child feel less anxious and more in control.
- Give realistic information so that your child knows what to expect. If possible, avoid saying "it won't hurt".
- It is reasonable for your child to be distressed. Let them know that it's OK for them to not like what is happening, but reassure them in a calm voice that they will be OK afterwards.
- If coping with blood tests/needles and/or other medical procedures is something that you know you will find difficult, please talk to us in advance.

Further information

If you have any further questions or concerns about your child's blood test or cannula, contact the ward that has asked for your child to have the procedure. The telephone number should be on the appointment letter, but if you are unsure our main hospital switchboard is: 023 8077 7222.

Helpful resources

Watch our online video:
www.uhs.nhs.uk/childrensbloodtest

Monkey Has a Blood Test
 (storybook):
www.monkeywellbeing.com

Books about coming into hospital may also be available from your local library, for example:
Going to the Hospital by Anne Civardi (Usborne First Experiences).

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www.uhs.nhs.uk/childrenshospital

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