

## Patient information factsheet

# Blood, injury and needle phobias and procedural anxiety

**Needle or injection phobias** are when people feel very scared of needles and having injections. Often, it is so bad that they avoid receiving injections and/or having a blood sample taken.

**Blood phobia** is when people intensely fear and avoid situations involving direct or indirect exposure to blood, injuries wounds and so forth.

Many people have fears about needles, injections or blood, but it is called a phobia when the fear is very intense and it interferes with people's lives. For some people, these phobias can lead them to avoid going to their doctor or hospital, even when they need urgent treatment.

Many people might not have a phobia about needles or blood but still have intense anxiety about medical procedures. This is called **procedural anxiety**. These people might not avoid medical care but the thought of having an injection will fill them with dread, even though they can control this fear.

### Causes of blood/injury/needle phobia or medical procedural anxiety

Anyone could develop a fear of medical procedures, needles or injections. It is thought that approximately 10% of the population have a needle phobia.

There are different reasons why people develop needle/blood/injury phobias or medical procedural anxiety:

- They have had a negative experience when they were young. For example, a very painful procedure at hospital or procedures when they have felt out of control or restrained.
- A fear has developed because somebody else close to you has had a bad experience of needles/medical procedures or is phobic themselves.
- Some people have a vasovagal response to seeing needles, which unlike with other phobias and anxieties causes fainting. This accounts for approximately half of people with a needle phobia but only a small proportion of people who experience anxiety around medical procedures.

It is common for people who have had to have lots of hospital care to develop a fear of injections and other medical procedures. This is because they start to associate coming into hospital with previous bad experiences. The fear and anticipation of being hurt makes them anxious before going in for any treatment.

### Symptoms of anxiety

Whether you think you have a phobia or procedural anxiety, the anxiety you feel before, during and perhaps after a procedure will often show in the following physical and emotional symptoms:

- Breathlessness
- Excessive sweating
- Nausea or stomach distress
- Dryness of mouth
- Anxiety
- Irritability
- Shaking/trembling
- Heart palpitations, pounding heart or accelerating heart rate
- Loss of appetite
- Inability to speak or think clearly
- A sensation of detachment from reality
- Fear of fainting
- Fear of losing control.

## Triggers for the anxiety

People do not have to be at the hospital to experience panic attacks or anxiety connected to needles, blood, injury or medical procedures. There are many other triggers that can start the symptoms of anxiety:

- Blood or injuries that are either seen or spoken about
- Watching certain programmes on television
- The sight of needles
- An antiseptic smell associated with hospitals
- Thinking about a procedure, coming into hospital or reading this!

## Coping with or overcoming the fear

### Getting to know your anxiety

For different people, it is different aspects of medical procedures that cause anxiety. For some people, it is the pain of a procedure (e.g. you have had a procedure that has been really painful before or you are worried that this will be really painful) for others it might be the feelings or thoughts that are associated with it (e.g. feeling dizzy, thoughts that you are not in control of a situation or having fainted in the past). Depending on what starts the anxiety, different techniques are useful to help overcome it. So initially it is useful to ask yourself:

- What does the fear say about seeing blood, having an injection or a specific medical procedure?
- What is the thing that I like least about it?

It also might be helpful to think about things that make the anxiety less:

- When do I feel calmer around blood, needles or medical procedures?

Once you have started to notice what invites anxiety in for you or lessens it, here are some ideas that might help.

### Staying in control

Often people with these anxieties have had experiences where they have felt out of control and these thoughts and feelings fuel anxiety. Here are some basic ideas to help stay in control of the situation.

- **Finding out information** – check out any queries you might have, e.g. about any procedures and what happens to your body. You can use this to make sure you do not have any misconceptions of what might happen or what happened in the past. It will also help you to know your body, prepare you for the procedure and reassure you nothing bad is going to happen.
- **Letting the doctors and nurses know how you feel** – you can also use these conversations to let the medical staff know how you are feeling and what information you would like or not like to know. This helps both you and the medical staff. They can help you be in charge of your treatment and they will know what information you might need to have to help you feel more relaxed.
- **Participate in decision making, talk about worries** – as you and medical staff start to understand what the worry focuses on, you can work together to try to ensure that the anxiety does not get in the way of you being well.
- **It's your choice** – always remember that it is your choice and your body. You can work with the medical staff to think about how you have procedures carried out. For example,
  - Do you want someone with you?
  - Do you want to lie down/sit down/stand up?
  - Do you want to use anaesthetic spray?

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- Do you want to talk through the procedure beforehand?
- Do you want to be distracted?
- How would you like the nurse/doctor to be? Do you want them to talk you through the procedure or remain quiet or reassure you?

You can always write these ideas down and make sure they are in your medical file so that other medical staff know about what helps.

## Coping strategies

Trying to notice when you feel calmer about medical visits or procedures will help you to identify what helps you cope with anxiety. But here are some ideas that have been shown to help reduce anxiety.

- **Distraction techniques** – this is when you do something or focus on something other than the situation or thought that you are worrying about. This can really help you feel less anxious if you decide to use it as a strategy, rather than other people trying to distract you. Some examples could be:
  - Listening to music
  - Reading a book or magazine
  - Looking at photos on your phone or on Pinterest
  - Playing a game on your phone
  - Texting or ringing a friend
- **Reassuring yourself and challenging negative thoughts** - the anxious thoughts that trigger and fuel phobias are usually negative and unrealistic. It can help to put these thoughts to the test. For example, often people think “I cannot cope with having a blood test” and to question this thought you could ask:
  - Is there any evidence that contradicts this thought?  
“I have learnt some new techniques to help me keep calm.”  
“I have got through blood tests before even though I was anxious.”  
“I have often felt less anxious when the nurse is taking my bloods than when I was waiting for them to be taken.”
  - Could you do anything to resolve this situation if it does occur?  
“I am in charge and if I need to stop I can.”  
“If I start to feel panicky, I can distract myself.”
  - Are you making a thinking error?  
“I am fortune telling as I don’t know how it will go and thinking in all-or-nothing terms”
  - What would you say to a friend who has this fear?  
“I would remind them about how they have coped in the past and how nothing bad has happened.”
- **Using imagery** – some people find it really useful to think about a time in the past when they have felt really good and calm (e.g. somewhere that is really relaxing, or being with a person that you love and feel safe with). If you create a picture of this in your head, remembering all the feelings you had in your body, the smells that were around, the sounds you heard, anything you could feel at the time and the thoughts you had, it can make you feel calmer and more relaxed.
- **Using relaxation techniques** – when people start to feel anxious their body often starts to tense and their breathing quickens. Learning deep breathing and muscle relaxation techniques can be really powerful in decreasing anxiety. You could try this on your own, or you may prefer to join a group. You can get more information about this from the physiotherapists or psychologists.

There are lots of relaxation and mindfulness apps available, as well as relaxation CDs and books. Search online or ask at your local library or bookshop.

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## Pain relief

For some people the anxiety is associated with previous negative experiences of painful procedures. Other people find particular procedures very painful. It is useful to talk to the medical/nursing staff about these concerns and they will discuss the options available to assist in reducing pain during procedures.

Also research has shown that if people feel calmer it reduces their experience of pain. Therefore, by using the other strategies in this leaflet to feel more confident about the medical procedure and less anxious, you should start to experience the procedure as less painful.

## Preventing the vasovagal response

As noted above, some people have an unusual biological response to seeing needles, blood or injuries. These are techniques that can lessen the likelihood of fainting during medical procedures:

- Lying down or having legs elevated while receiving an injection can help. Stay in this position until it feels comfortable.
- Tensing and relaxing your hands and feet can help to lessen the likelihood of fainting.

Using these techniques can help people by lessening the likelihood to faint and therefore reassuring them. This will decrease the anxiety over time.

## Exposure therapy

One type of therapy that has shown to be effective in helping people become more confident in situations that they fear is called exposure therapy or systematic desensitization. In this type of therapy you are exposed in a safe and controlled way to the object or situation you fear. The most commonly used exposure therapy involves gradual encounters with the fear-producing object, first in the imagination and then in reality. Through repeated experiences of facing your fear you begin to realise that the situation, while unpleasant, is not harmful. With each exposure you feel an increasing sense of control.

Some people like to use these ideas to improve their confidence and help themselves learn to be less anxious. For step by step advice on how to gradually face a phobia through exposure therapy you can visit the following website: [http://www.anxietybc.com/sites/default/files/FacingFears\\_Exposure\\_0.pdf](http://www.anxietybc.com/sites/default/files/FacingFears_Exposure_0.pdf)

Other people find it helpful to meet with a psychological therapist to help them start implementing these ideas.

## More help and information

If you would like to know more about these ideas and how to become more confident about needles, blood or medical procedures, please contact your GP and ask to be referred to your local psychological services.

## Additional references

Overcoming Medical Phobias: How to Conquer Fear of Blood, Needles, Doctors, and Dentists by Mark Watling and Martin M. Antony.

**If you need a translation of this document, an interpreter or a version in large print, Braille or on audiotape, please telephone 023 8120 4688 for help.**