

## Nine Ways You Can Reduce the Pain and Fear of Needing a Needle

By Amy Baxter, MD, CEO of MMJ Labs and inventor of Buzzy® Drug Free Pain Relief | April 10, 2014

*This is the second installment in a two-part series on what's working to prevent and address needle fear. To learn more about needle phobia and what health care providers are doing, check out [Part I: "A Shot of Courage for Those Who Fear Needles"](#). Click to view Amy Baxter's TED talk on [Pain, Empathy, and Public Health](#).*

"Fear is the mindkiller. Fear is the little death." – Frank Herbert, Dune

In 1995, a [scientific paper](#) was published for the first time evaluating the prevalence of needle fear and its effect on accessing health care. Since then, [studies suggest](#) that the fear of needles is rising, afflicting a quarter of adults and two out of three children.



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Needle phobia seems to be more likely in people who are sensitive to a light touch and sharp objects, particularly those with the "red head pain" MC1R gene. While most people acquire needle phobia around age four to six, about three to five percent of people have a genetic predisposition to become lightheaded or nauseated or even to faint.

But whether acquired or innate, fear not! Quite literally – here are nine ways to reduce the pain and fear of needing a needle at any age.

**1. Pain Management.** When time permits, needle pain can be greatly reduced by using topical pain relief – specifically, topical anesthetic numbing creams and gels — which numb the skin in 20-60 minutes. Fun tip: use Glad® Press-N-Seal rather than the commercial medical covers. It is more comfortable to remove and much less expensive.

**2. Let your brain do its thing.** Overwhelm other competing nerves with sensations that aren't so painful. Studies have found that when someone's hand is in ice water, they can handle more intense pain everywhere else in the body. This works both through something called [gate control](#) (e.g. cool water soothes a burn) as much as brain bandwidth. [Vibration and cold](#) have been studied together; when put between the brain and the pain (especially after numbing a shot area directly), they [can decrease needle pain](#) up to 80%.

**3. Relax the muscles.** Pushing medication into taut muscles makes it hurt more, now and later. Even passively stretched muscles hurt. Rather than bending over and going for a gluteal stick, try lying on your side with the buttocks muscles relaxed. Do the same for thigh shots; sitting up causes the muscles to be active keeping you balanced, so go for a side position.

**4. Distract your mind.** [Counting and engaging in unrelated tasks](#) can reduce pain by half. At a minimum, count corners, ceiling tiles, or holes in an air grate. Some studies have found that [active engagement](#) can be more effective at reducing pain for teens and adults. Drawing on an iPad game or finding items in "I Spy" apps, can work at any age.

**5. Distract your senses.** The brain can only process so much at one time. Buy five packs of sugar-free gum, mix the sticks, pick one at random, and try to figure out the flavor. Drink a slug of a cold, sweet beverage. Taste and smell are great senses to counter paying attention to pain.

**6. Focus on something you can control.** Whether you're thinking about the health or life benefits of the shot, concentrate on that. Fertility shots, for example, can have an adorable payoff. Building an idea in your mind and mentally "going there" can help with pain.

**7. Create a different sensation.** Pinching your own finger and focusing on that or forcing a cough have [both been shown](#) to decrease needle pain. Squeezing your toes, stretching your calf, or making any distant body part more noticeable to your brain will take attention away from the area of pain.

**8. Be a scientist.** If you know you have multiple needle events coming up, keep records of what works best and what doesn't. Being an observer, even of yourself, adds distance that can give you more control. More control = less fear. Less fear = less pain.

**9. Speak up!** Let your care team know you don't like needles, and let them know what you have found what works for you. "You know how some people pass out with

needles? Shots and I don't get along, so let me tell you what works for me. I really appreciate you listening to me; it makes everything go so much better for both of us. What seems to help me is this: "\_\_\_\_\_." Even if you haven't ever gotten lightheaded or passed out, reminding care providers of people who have can help establish that you understand that procedural pain is important and you give them credit for appreciating it, too.

Do needles make you nervous? Have you found a strategy that reduces needle anxiety or pain? Post your experiences and tips to the comments section.

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