

“Needle Phobia”

Who hasn't seen them – social media posts of happy, newly-vaccinated individuals brandishing CDC vaccination cards? These images evoke a variety of normal emotions among viewers, but for some, the mere thought of getting an injection or sight of a needle can trigger more extreme reactions.



Trypanophobia (“needle phobia”) can prevent people from seeking medical care, visiting dentists, following prescribed treatments, and/or obtaining necessary lab work. Although trypanophobia is officially recognized by the American Psychiatric Association, its prevalence in the general population is difficult to determine. Those with needle phobia commonly experience a range of physical symptoms, before and after injections, but tend to be able to return to normal activity within a few hours.

Fear of needles can cause people to avoid the health care system for as long as possible and have impacts on social, academic, and occupational functioning, as well as leisure opportunities. Blood tests are often required for marriage licenses and prenatal care may be impacted by personal decisions made by people with needle phobia as well. Occasionally, legal problems arise from failure to comply with court-ordered treatments involving injections.

Fear of needles can also prevent some people from engaging in celebrated pro-social activities like voluntary blood drives and vaccination campaigns. For individuals, this can be the cause of a variety of emotional experiences and social consequences. For contingency response planners and public health officials charged with maintaining readiness and the health and well-being of communities there are practical considerations and barriers to overcome.

There are several strategies for mitigating the impacts of Trypanophobia:

- When getting a shot or having your blood drawn, **ask to have your feet elevated above your head.** This can bring more blood to the brain reducing the risk of fainting
- **Gels and creams are available that numb injection sites.** This is useful for people who are extremely sensitive to pain. They reduce anticipatory anxiety that can trigger the fainting reflex
- **Distraction and misdirection** are keys to a good magic show, but they are also useful in dealing with pain and fear around injections. The pathway to the brain for sharp pain can be shut down by the same nerves that carry signals for cold and vibration sensation. There are devices available that transmit cold and vibration sensations between the injection site and the brain, reducing pain in children and adults
- **Systematic Desensitization** is a behavioral therapy that involves controlled exposure to needles while paired with learned relaxation techniques. It is particularly helpful for people whose lives may be endangered by the avoidance of medical intervention
- **Cognitive therapy** can be used to challenging negative thoughts about fear and pain and fear can help with facing fears gradually
- **Hypnosis** can be beneficial for some people with needle phobia. However, some career fields are prohibited from receiving this form of treatment due to security concerns
- **Medications** can be used to reduce anxiety in preparation for a needle stick

Bottom Line – have an open dialogue with your health care provider about your concerns. In due time you too will be able to pose triumphantly and posting selfies with that well-earned vaccination card!