

Fight the Phobia!

Fear of needles Can be conquered.

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Needles, and syringes and lancets, oh my! For many people with diabetes, the fear, anxiety and aversion to sharp objects that prick the skin can set the heart racing and shoot blood sugars through the roof. Treatment for diabetes is hampered when you reject your doctor's suggestions to complete diagnostic blood tests, when you avoid the use of lancets to perform blood glucose monitoring, or when you refuse treatment that involves the use of syringes. Clearly, needle phobia is not to be taken lightly.

Trypanophobia is name for the extreme fear of medical procedures involving injections or needles. For some, the fear is so extreme that the very sight of a needle can cause fainting or vomiting. For most, the anxiety is not nearly so extreme. In fact, a certain amount of needle anxiety can be healthy, and probably has a hereditary component. From the stone ages through the middle ages, without antibiotics or proper first aid, survival depended on avoidance of wounds from thorns, splinters, teeth, claws, and man-made weapons such as axes, spears and swords. Not surprisingly, men are more prone to needle phobia than women, and about 10% of all Americans suffer from some form of this disorder.

A nervous system reflex is responsible for some of the symptoms associated with needle phobia. You may feel clammy or cold, turn pale, feel nauseous, or have difficulty breathing when in the presence of a hypodermic needle. You may feel sweaty or tingly, and your blood pressure may drop. To make matters worse, the skin surface may become hypersensitive, making injections seem ever more uncomfortable.

So, what's a needle phobic to do? First and foremost, don't just give up. As a person with

diabetes, your health and well-being depend on your ability to deal with sharp objects. Try some of the suggestions below:

- ✓ Accept that fear of needles is normal and commonplace. You are certainly not alone. One in 10 of people share your fear of needles. They may not talk about it, but they are out there. Realize that your needle phobia is most likely an inherited condition, and that your reaction to needles is involuntary. It's not 'all in your head.'
- ✓ Practice some sensible techniques to lessen symptoms and pain:
 1. Use topical anesthesia at the needle site (ice, ethyl chloride spray, or topical anesthetic creams). Only the surface of the skin will be numb but the initial shock of the puncture may be decreased.
 2. For additional pain relief, explore the use of iontophoresis, a process that drives anesthetic through the skin by using an electrical current.
 3. Avoid the sight of the needle puncturing the skin. Place cloth between needle point and skin when injecting medications; use pens, syringes, and lancing devices that have covered caps. Try devices such as the Autoject (Owen Mumford), Inject-Ease (BD), Instaject (Medicool), and NovoPen Penmate (Novo Nordisk).
 4. If you take rapid-acting insulin at mealtimes, speak to your doctor about using an inhalable insulin or a jet injector for spraying the insulin through the skin

(albeit with some discomfort). You may still need to take one or two daily injections of long-acting insulin, but you may feel more comfortable knowing that a needle is not necessary at every meal.

5. Reduce pain when injecting insulin by pinching the skin (avoid inserting the needle into muscle) and using fine gauge and short needles. Penetrate the skin quickly with minimal hesitation.
6. Minimize the pain of lancing the finger tips by using fine gauge lancets, using the sides of the fingertips, or switching to alternate site testing.

For those with extreme fear of needles (fainting, vomiting, etc.), more intensive treatment and action may be necessary. For instance:

- ✓ Learn all that you can about needle phobia. Talk to your doctor or diabetes educator. Go to websites such as the Needle Phobia Information Site (www.needlephobia.info) and The Needle Phobia Page (<http://www.webcom.com/cfsc/needles.html>) Read all you can about this disorder.

- ✓ Avoid unnecessary needle procedures that may condition you to excessive fear and anxiety. Reserve needle procedures for health care treatments or diagnoses that really matter.
- ✓ During a needle procedure, elevate your legs and feet while lying down or reclining to avoid lightheadedness or fainting.
- ✓ Participate in desensitization therapy by a qualified health care practitioner. You may be able to “unlearn” the nervous system response and extinguish irrational fears by using a combination of relaxation techniques and pain relievers.
- ✓ Try behavioral therapy. This treatment is most effective when provided by a trained therapist who has experience in diabetes.
- ✓ Watch others inject themselves or lance their finger for blood glucose testing whenever possible. Seeing others face needles effortlessly may help lessen the fear and anxiety when your turn comes.

References:

http://www.findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m0689/is_n2_v41/ai_17276569 (landmark review article by Dr. James G. Hamilton on needle phobia)

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Trypanophobia> (classic definition of needle phobia)

<http://www.diabetesselfmanagement.com/article.cfm?aid=1702> (great article on children with Type 1 diabetes and needle phobia)