

NEEDLING FEAR

by Henry Lew, psychologist

It's small and thin but it can strike terror in the hearts of even the strongest and biggest. Almost everyone hates needles. Unfortunately for some, the fear of needles can be so intense that it can drive people away from seeking medical or dental treatment. As for insulin treatment and dialysis, you simply cannot escape from needles. What can you do to overcome your fears?

Before you read on, check the boxes below to see which of these reactions may be associated with a fear of needles.

- shallow breathing
- feeling sick
- nausea
- intense fear
- feeling dizzy and light-headed
- dry mouth
- palpitations
- sweating
- trembling
- recurring disturbing images of needles in your mind
- persistent thoughts about needles/injections

Any of the above may be associated with fear of needles. This is why it can be so overwhelming and difficult for someone with a fear of needles. "Will power" alone is not enough to manage this range of reactions.

How bad can fear of needles be?

To those of us who are generally healthy and do not need to come into contact with needles that often, it may not be very much of a concern. But to those of us with a chronic illness like diabetes where we need to monitor our glucose level regularly (i.e., that means pricking our fingers for blood), or if we need to inject insulin regularly, it is a huge concern.

Fear of needles can result in:

Irregular
glucose
monitoring

Irregular
insulin
doses

Refusal
of
blood
tests

Any of the three behaviours may make it harder to manage diabetes and put us at greater health risks.



The needle may be seen not only as a potential source of physical discomfort, but also a threat to your lifestyle and livelihood.

Validate your child's fears and do not minimise them. Express empathy for their fears, reluctance, avoidance and frustration.

Frame the message about the need to have insulin injections positively and link it to one of the goals that they would like to attain.

STEP 1 Sort out and deal with your other associated fears

Fear of needles may be related to other fears.

These associated fears could intensify or complicate the fear of needles:

- Fear that you would lose your lifestyle or even employment if you start regular insulin or glucose monitoring. People often perceive the regime of regular insulin and glucose monitoring as too time consuming that it may affect their work. Or they feel it is inconvenient to execute outside the home, that carrying them out may mean giving up your active lifestyle. The needle may be seen not only as a potential source of physical discomfort, but also a threat to your lifestyle and livelihood.
- Fear that your condition could become worse. Many patients think that once they are on insulin, it means that their diabetic condition has become so bad that oral medications no longer help. They think that they will start to lose their sight and even limbs.
- Fear of making mistakes while performing injection. Patients new to insulin injection may not be confident enough to perform the injection on themselves. Or if they are elderly, they may find the procedure too complicated. As such, they may fear that they could make a mistake when they inject themselves and experience more pain, have injuries or put their health at further risk.

To overcome these associated fears:

- For the fear of losing employment and lifestyle habits, and the fear of their health worsening, find out more from your healthcare provider, other diabetes patients or look up books, magazines, or the Internet. You will find that there are many diabetes patients who still enjoy a good quality of life and employment even when they make blood glucose monitoring or insulin injection a regular part of their lives.
- For the fear of making mistakes while injecting insulin, speak to a diabetes nurse educator who will patiently guide you through the steps of insulin injection and help you gain confidence at a comfortable pace.

You could ask them if a family member could tag along and learn, so that you have someone for support at home, too.

And, of course, nothing beats the age-old saying, practice makes perfect.





STEP 2 Facing your fear of needles

Consider these tips:

- Actively and intentionally focus on the reasons you are injecting insulin each time you start to find yourself getting fearful, such as being able to participate in more activities with your loved ones.
- Pinch your skin, use finer or shorter needles to reduce your pain. Explore and learn from your healthcare provider ways and products you can use to ease the pain.
- Before you inject insulin or prick your fingers to monitor your blood glucose, relax. Take a few deep breaths, or count to 10 to relax. Perform brief relaxation exercises.
- Do not avoid the topic of needles. Read up, find out more about it, as this will help you to gain the confidence you need to face your fear.
- Try observational learning to allay your fears. Find opportunities to watch other patients who are experienced inject themselves.
- Explore with your healthcare provider the options of an injection pen where the needles are not seen and you do not have to witness your skin being pricked.
- Gradually build your confidence in facing your fears by first looking at the needles until you are not scared, then holding it in your hands until you are not scared. Inject at less painful areas like the stomach before exploring alternate sites for injection.

Parents who need to inject for their children with diabetes:

- You may not have a fear of needles but research shows that parents tend to be anxious when injecting their children. This could actually make the fearful child more anxious. Take deep breaths and relax before you do anything for your child.
- Learn from and work closely with your child's nurse clinician to manage your child's needle anxiety.
- Validate your child's fear and do not minimise it. Express empathy for his fear, reluctance, avoidance and frustration.
 - Frame the message about the need to have insulin injections positively and link it to one of the goals that they would like to attain. For example, they need the insulin to be healthy so that can take part in the sport they like.
 - Prepare them way in advance; tell them that it will soon be time for an injection. Do not restrain or spring up on them and inject them out of the blue, as this may increase, if not perpetuate, their fear of needles and injections.
 - Help them to relax before an injection. Soothe them with an activity or play.
 - As much as you can, distract them throughout the process. Talk to them to take their attention away from the needle.

