



# COVID-19 Vaccination: Dealing with needle distress

## A guide for managing needle distress during immunisation for parents and carers of children

While most children dislike needles, some children experience needle distress, or an increased level of anxiety and fear related to needles. People with serious needle distress or phobia can feel dizzy or nauseous and may faint at the sight or thought of needles. If it's not treated appropriately, needle distress may become a lifelong issue leading to avoidance of immunisations and other important medical procedures.

Needle distress is common among children. It can occur in any child, particularly those with anxiety or previous negative medical experiences. It is also common among children with developmental conditions including autism spectrum disorder.

Effective planning and preparation, distraction techniques and pain management strategies are important when preparing to vaccinate a child with needle phobia. Sometimes an increased level of support which includes sedation may be needed for some children with severe needle distress.

## Key strategies

- **Discuss the upcoming immunisation appointment with your child.** See our [fact sheet](#) COVID-19 vaccination planning for young children.
- **Ensure that children are not forced** to be vaccinated and that appropriate holding procedures are used, such as positioning the child sideways on the lap of the parent/carer, with the arm to be injected held close to the child's body, while the other arm is tucked under the armpit and behind the back of the parent/carer. It is appropriate to have up to two attempts with no force before stopping and considering higher levels of support for the child (see below under distraction or severe needle distress).
- **Distraction techniques** are very helpful, including:
  - musical toys
  - favourite shows or videos to watch on a phone, tablet or TV in the immunisation clinic
  - child-friendly sensory distractions like cold wands or vibratory devices, such as the "buzzy bee" which is attached to the top of the child's arm
  - virtual reality headsets, with child-friendly programs for the child to be immersed in
  - hypnotherapy, where appropriate





### **If vaccination cannot be completed on the day**

Immunisation providers will use a range of techniques to support your child getting vaccinated. Sometimes, due to distress and various other reasons, vaccination may not be completed on the day. There are a number of options available to further support your child if this happens:

- **Try again at a later time or day** when your child may be more settled.
- Consider a **low-sensory vaccination site** which may be quieter and less distressing for your child.
- **Speak to your regular GP** to see if vaccination can be arranged in their practice and **in a more familiar environment**.
- For some children, **it may be appropriate to get a referral from a GP to see a psychologist** for support and strategies to deal with the child's needle distress.
- Severe pain and distress **can be managed in the hospitals setting with awake sedation**
  - There are specific referral pathways to clinics for children and adults
  - Sedation may include the use of nitrous oxide gas (laughing gas) with or without oral medication

Here are some suggested resources you may like to access:

- [The Royal Children's Hospital Clinical Practice Guidelines for Procedural Pain Management](#)
- [The Royal Children's Hospital Be Positive: Nitrous Oxide](#)
- [The Royal Children's Hospital comfort kids- for kids](#)
- [The Royal Children's Hospital comfort kids- for parents](#)
- [The Royal Children's Hospital Be Positive: Immunisations](#)
- [RCH Kids Health Info Podcast: Fear of needles. What helps?](#)
- <https://mvec.mcri.edu.au/references/needle-phobia/>
- [Meg Foundation website](#)
- [The Conversation: Is your child frightened of needles? Here's how to prepare them for their COVID vaccine](#)

