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How to reduce children's pain from immunization

Why is pain from immunization a concern?

Vaccines protect your child from serious diseases. Most children feel pain from the experience. Pain may cause your child to develop a fear of needles or other medical procedures.

What can I do to reduce my child's pain from immunization?

Steps to reduce needle pain in babies:

1. **Cuddle your baby** on your lap during the immunization.
2. **If you are breastfeeding, feed your baby before, during and after the needle.**
Breastfeeding calms and comforts both the baby and mother and can reduce baby's pain.
3. **If you are not breastfeeding, sugar water can be given to infants less than 12 months.**
To make sugar water, mix one packet of sugar (1 teaspoon) with 10 ml of water (2 teaspoons). Give it to your baby with a cup, spoon or syringe just before the needle and discard the unused portion. *DO NOT use sugar at home to calm upset or crying babies.*
4. Allow your baby to suck when receiving the needle.

Steps to reduce needle pain in babies and older children:

1. **Tell your child about the vaccine.**
 - **Describe what will happen and how it will feel.** Do not tell your child that it won't hurt. Instead say the pain lasts a short time and feels like a "sting", "poke" or "squeeze".
 - School age children can be told at home before visiting the doctor.
 - Tell toddlers and preschoolers just before receiving the vaccine.

Answer your child's questions.

- Why do I need a vaccine? ("To help you stay healthy.")
- What will happen? ("The medicine will be put in your arm with a needle.")
- How will it feel? ("You may feel a poke or small sting that will last a few seconds.")

2. **Plan what to bring to the visit.**

Before going to the doctor's office, help your child choose items to bring that are interesting (e.g. toys, books) and provide comfort (e.g. favorite blanket, stuffed animal).

3. **Consider using medications to numb the skin.**

- Three products are available in Canada without a prescription: EMLA[®] (lidocaine-prilocaine), Ametop[®] (amethocaine), or Maxilene[®] (liposomal lidocaine). The products can take 30 to 60 minutes to work, depending on the brand.
- Before using any medication, read the information provided and talk to your doctor or pharmacist to learn how, where and how much medication to apply.

4. **Have your child sit up-right when receiving the vaccine.**

- Hug or cuddle young children in your lap for comfort. Do not lay your child flat.

Fact Sheet

5. **Stay calm when your child receives the needle.** Your child can sense your feelings of worry which may increase his or her fear. The more fearful a child is before receiving a needle, the more pain he or she may feel.
 - **Be yourself: use a normal voice, smile and be relaxed.** Your child will feel that everything is okay.
 - **Avoid words that can focus a child's attention on the needle and increase fear** such as: "It'll be over soon and you'll be okay", "I'm sorry you have to go through this", or "I know it hurts."
 - **Talk about things** that can focus your child's attention away from getting a needle.
Involve your child when speaking to the doctor or nurse by helping them to remember:
 - an outing to the park;
 - a fun or interesting activity done at home or at school;
 - something your child learned or did that made you proud; or
 - an up-coming event or visit that your child is excited about.
6. **Take your child's attention away from the needle with activities or toys.**
 - **Children can:** play with a toy, stuffed animal, pop-up book, or game; listen to music or watch a handheld device or movie.
 - **Parents can:** sing a favorite song or read a favorite book to an infant, toddler or preschool child; or talk about things that are of interest or amusing to an older child.
7. **Ask your child to take a deep breath.**

Deep breathing reduces the pain from a needle and a child's distress during immunization.

 - Practice counting and breathing deeply and slowly.
 - Just before the needle, take out a windmill, party blower or bottle of bubbles and ask your child to take a deep breath and blow on the object.
 - Tell an older child to take a deep breath at the time the needle is given, and blow the "sting of the needle away".
8. **Praise and reward your child.**
 - After the needle, tell your child he/she did well.
 - Positive recognition and rewards after the procedure such as stickers or certificates help a child feel good about the skills they learned during the procedure.
9. **Acetaminophen** (e.g. Tylenol[®], Tempra[®]) **or ibuprofen** (e.g. Motrin[®], Advil[®])
 - These medications are not recommended for use *before* your child receives a needle.
 - They can be used *afterwards* for minor reactions such as fever, irritability or a sore arm.
 - Use these medications as directed by your doctor.

For more information contact:

Toronto Public Health Immunization Information Line at 416-392-1250.