

# What is Needle Phobia?

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Phobias are an intense and distressing fear of an object, animal, situation or experience. They can be quite debilitating and may cause us to avoid certain tasks or activities, to the point that we neglect important matters at work, social activities, in relationships, or with our health.

Needle phobia is a common medical phobia. Up to 10% of people experience a moderate to severe phobia of needles (although many more have a mild fear).

This fear often begins in childhood but can also develop later in adolescence or adulthood. Needle phobia is experienced by a wide range of people, including people who work in the medical profession.



## Symptoms of needle phobia

You may experience a range of physical sensations associated with the fear response. These may occur as you prepare to get a needle; for example, while sitting in the waiting room or waiting for an injection to be administered. The fear response can also be activated by a picture or just the thought of a needle – you may even experience some sensations reading this information sheet. Typical physical sensations associated with the fear response include increased heart rate, increased blood pressure, trembling, shaking, and breathlessness. Sometimes it can be so intense you might experience a panic attack. You may also experience intense urges to escape, or avoid having needles in future.

## Needles and fainting

Fainting is a common experience, with around half of people with a needle phobia having fainted at least once. This reaction is unique to needle phobia and does not occur in other phobias. Fainting related to needle phobia occurs due to a two-stage physical response. The first stage involves an initial increase in blood pressure in anticipation of the situation as described above. This is followed by a sudden drop in blood pressure and heart rate when the needle is actually encountered or administered. For some people this triggers a fainting response. The mechanisms for this are unclear, but it is thought that there are differences between people in how sensitive we are to changes in blood pressure; we also know that really intense fear

can activate the vagus nerve which causes fainting. There may also be an evolutionary advantage to fainting – similar to ‘playing dead’ when faced with danger.

## Causes of needle phobia

For some people, their phobia can be triggered by a past bad experience with a needle. We may also learn to fear needles through observing other people’s reactions and attitudes to needles, or receiving information that they are dangerous or really painful. There is some evidence that there may be a genetic predisposition to developing phobias.

The way we think about needles has a direct impact on the activation of our fear response. In some cases we might have clear predictions that something bad will happen, like the needle will be really painful, or that something will go wrong. Sometimes we have images of what it will be like that we find disgusting, or that remind us of a previous negative experience. We might also hold more broad underlying beliefs that are harder to identify, such as “needles are awful” that are enough to trigger our fear response. In some cases, we can become afraid of our reaction to the needle, particularly if we have fainted previously. You might find that you are less bothered by the needle itself, and more concerned about fainting as a result!



Once we have a needle phobia, we tend to avoid situations with needles altogether; or we endure them with a high level of distress. Sometimes we might do things to help prevent our fear from coming true – for example, using a local anaesthetic if we are afraid of the pain, or lying down for the needle in case we faint. While these things help get us through that particular needle situation, they also serve to maintain our fear response. This is because we never get to test out whether the needle is as painful as we expect, or learn that we don’t always faint. We also don’t get the opportunity to develop and apply coping skills for dealing with the situation effectively.

## What can be done about needle phobia?

The good news is that there are things you can do to overcome needle phobia, by safely and gradually learning to test your fears. Take a look at our information sheet ‘Overcoming Needle Phobia’ to find out more.