



7 Tips to Make Vaccinations Less Stressful

Yearly vaccinations for diseases like the flu and COVID are a simple way to protect our health and prevent the spread of infectious illnesses. But for individuals with I/DD, who may also have sensory issues, getting a shot can be a stressful event. Needle phobia, dealing with new people, and aversion to being touched are factors that can increase anxiety and make vaccination an unpleasant, or even frightening, experience.

Here are seven tips to make vaccinations easier and less stressful:

1. Help them prepare

Make sure they know what's going to happen and that getting a shot will help keep them and everyone around them from getting sick. Let them know that trained personnel will be giving them the shot and review the different things they might see, hear, or smell. The CDC offers a toolkit on their website with materials designed for individuals with I/DD. It includes downloadable posters, interactive stories, and videos in both English and Spanish.

2. Acknowledge their feelings

Reinforce that their feelings are valid and understand that they might not be able to effectively articulate their emotions. Avoid saying things like, "Don't worry," or "You'll be fine." Instead, let them know that you understand and that it's okay to be nervous or scared.

3. Choose words wisely

Neutral words, like "pinch" or "poke," are less intimidating than "pain" or "shot" and may help ease fears and reduce anxiety. It may also be helpful to refer to the vaccine as medicine that will help keep them healthy. It's important to avoid apologizing. An apology is for a mistake – taking care of their health is the right thing to do.

4. Prepare the vaccinator

Let the vaccinator know about the individual's triggers as well as anything that might help them feel more relaxed. Ideally, the vaccinator should have experience with the I/DD community.

5. Bring a vaccinator to the individual if possible

Bringing individuals with I/DD to a doctor's office or vaccine clinic with crowded spaces, bright lights, and noise can increase anxiety and cause overstimulation. Allowing them to stay in the setting where they are comfortable and minimizing disruption to their routine can help.

6. If no, make sure caregivers are allowed

If it's necessary to bring an individual to a doctor's office or clinic, make sure that their caregiver can stay with them during their vaccination. You should also confirm that the individual will be able to receive their vaccination in a private area away from other patients and that restrooms are accessible if needed.

7. Minimize waiting

Waiting for a vaccination, regardless of the location, can lead to increasing anxiety. Many clinics and doctors' offices offer sensory-friendly or expedited appointments to make the process go more quickly and minimize stress. If you have to wait, be sure to bring any items, like noise cancelling headphones, that will help them feel more comfortable or provide a positive distraction.