



Addressing Fears at Medical Visits and Procedures

When a child or person is frightened by medical visits or procedure, their behavior can cause problems with getting the health care they may need. The goal is to help the person cooperate more easily in the future. Once a person is no longer a young child, holding them down when they are fighting to get away can lead to increased fears in the future. Therefore, it is a good idea to try to avoid restraints, if possible.

- Work on these steps to try to prevent or address fears before they are out of control.
 - It is important to be patient. Improvements may take time.
1. **Assess the problem.** Think about what the trigger or cause of the fear is. Is it fear of a possible painful procedure like a shot? Or uncomfortable touch like taking a blood pressure? Or being around unfamiliar people like seeing the office team? Think about ideas that might help make it easier.
 2. **Do prep work.** Help the child or person know what to expect by using stories or practice play.
 3. **Use aids at the visit.** Try distractors, or visual aids or rearrange the order of the tasks at the visit in a different way to make it easier for the person to cooperate.

Practice ideas

Desensitization (or graduated exposure) uses small steps of the difficult activity to help the person grow adjusted to it, in a step-by-step way. **Prep work** can be done far in advance of the real procedure. Some children or persons need to practice for weeks to even months. Gradually increase the time or add the next step until the person is able to do the whole activity. Try to make a daily goal to work on comfort with one small part at a time. Read books, watch videos, or practice with toy doctor kits in a safe and comfortable environment. Praise and rewards can help the person feel proud of even small successes, (like getting out of the car and not getting upset in the parking lot.)

- **Height and Weight**
 - o Stand against the wall to measure your height with a flat surface like a book on your head.
 - o Take off shoes and step on a scale or other item that is about the right size.
- **Temperature**
 - o Put the practice thermometer under your tongue or in your armpit (under your clothes).
- **Blood pressure**
 - o Put a toy cuff around the arm and “pump” it up.
- **Heart and Lungs**
 - o Put stethoscope on chest and back. Practice taking deep breaths.
- **Eyes, nose, mouth exam**
 - o Practice looking in eyes or nose or mouth with a flashlight.
- **Ears**
 - o Try shining a flashlight in ears. Touch the top of the ear as you “look” inside.
 - o Whisper words in the person’s ears to help them stay calm.
- **Shots**

- Use a toy syringe as a practice tool. Get into a calm and relaxed position. Work on making the arm muscles loose. Look the other way and talk to someone or look at something relaxing or interesting. Try different ways to help control movement without fighting, like holding hands or leaning gently against the person or giving a hug.
- **The whole activity**
 - Play through the whole activity. Or take a dry run and walk through the actual place.
 - Let the child or person practice the activity with another person, a doll or stuffed animal.

Distractor ideas

Bring supplies to visits to help relax the person. Every person has different preferences for things they might find helpful. Try to find a few ideas that are enjoyable. When possible, allow the person more than one choice to give them some control in the situation.

- **Visual.**
 - Portable video player or game, bubbles, twirling toys, slinky, mirror
- **Sound.**
 - Music with headphones, sound-producing toys
- **Touch.**
 - Ice/cold pack, vibrating toy or small hand massager, heating pad, play dough, lotion/hand sanitizer, shaving cream
- **Movement.**
 - Play catch with small ball/balloon, do stretches, play drums with tongue depressor sticks, dance to a song.
- **Taste.**
 - Sweet or salty snacks, drinks, chewy/teething toy
- **Activity.**
 - Take an elevator ride, walk laps at the office, play a small game, draw or color
- **Social.**
 - Praise, pat on the back, hug, high five, special one-on-one time with a trusted person

Ask for help from the office team

- **Prioritize** what is most important to get done in that visit and what can wait for next time.
- Ask staff to provide **simple explanations** of what will happen next.
- Ask staff to use **direct simple requests**, like “come and sit here”.
- **Plan** if you expect to need more than one person to help with the task.
- Try to **move smoothly and quickly** through the more difficult tasks, to avoid giving time to spiral out of control.
- Make a plan for **when to stop** if it isn’t going well.

