



**Stem Cell Donors**  
Australia

# Managing a fear of needles while donating blood stem cells



**Approximately  
10% of Australians  
suffer from a  
needle phobia\*.**

Needle phobia is classed as having a moderate or severe fear or panic when confronted with a needle (either the idea of or an actual needle). Many more have a mild fear of needles. Whether you dislike them or have a phobia, you are not alone. If you are asked to donate your blood stem cells, needles are involved. Here are some strategies to help you cope.

## How to manage your needle phobia

### 1. Before you attend any appointment that involves a needle, understand how you feel and what triggers your phobia or fear.

- a. Are you worried about feeling intense pain?
- b. Are you concerned that you'll faint, feel too anxious or have a panic attack?
- c. Does seeing blood or too much blood concern you?
- d. Are you worried you'll be damaged by the needle?
- e. How do you react to your trigger? Do your hands get sweaty? Does your heart beat faster?

Fears, worries, and concerns are designed to alert you via an emotional or physical reaction

and help you decide whether there is a real threat that you need to act on. Knowing your triggers can help you manage your fear.

- ### 2. Check your triggers against the facts.
- It's easy to give into your preconceptions or even your past experiences of needles. The best way to manage your fear is to research and know the facts. For this to work, you need to be impartial and objective.

For example, if you fear being damaged by the needle, assessing the fear from both sides is best. Like a debate, look for reputable facts from reliable sources supporting your fear. Then, evaluate your fear that challenges or disproves your fear.



**Fear: I'll be damaged by the needle when I go for a blood test**

<b>For</b>	<b>Against</b>
The skin will be broken for the needle to be inserted into the vein.	A butterfly needle has attached wings to provide stability and ensure minimal discomfort when being used.
A butterfly needle increases the risk of vein damage because it is smaller.	Healthcare professionals are trained and follow strict protocols to minimise damage and complications.
The needle will cause pain.	<p>A butterfly needle comes in various sizes, from 18 to 27 gauge. This allows a healthcare professional to use the right size to reduce pain, particularly for small and fragile veins.</p> <p>A butterfly needle is inserted at a shallow angle to improve stability and reduce discomfort.</p>
Needles can leave bruises.	<p>Butterfly needles are skinnier and can be inserted at a shallower angle, reducing the risk of bruising.</p> <p>Applying firm pressure with a dressing helps to reduce bleeding and minimise bruising. Continued compression and not lifting heavy items for at least thirty minutes to an hour can prevent further bruising.</p>
There is a risk of a blood-borne infection.	<p>Butterfly needles are sterile and can only be used once. They also have an activated safety mechanism that insulates the needle and prevents further exposure.</p> <p>Healthcare professionals must follow strict procedures, including using and disposing of needles correctly.</p>
The vein could collapse.	<p>The tube of the butterfly needle results in a slower flood of blood, minimising the risk of the vein collapsing.</p> <p>Trained healthcare professionals understand the best insertion techniques to minimise this complication.</p>

Follow your assessment up with these questions:

**1**

Is your fear true?

**2**

Will your worry actually materialise? If so, how long does it last?

**3**

How bad is it in the grand scheme of things? Is it the worst thing that could happen?

**4**

Are there ways you could cope with your fear?

**3. Plan and prepare.** Think about ways to tackle your worries, fears, and concerns to help you reduce your anxiety. Sometimes, a practical approach, like looking away while the blood is being drawn, can help minimise your fear or feeling faint when seeing blood. If you are concerned about pain, you may be able to use numbing cream (available at chemists; speak to your pharmacist for more information about using numbing cream). Learning the “applied muscle tension” technique could help if you are prone to fainting.

There are ways to manage the anxiety itself by using deep and slow breathing techniques used during meditation and yoga. Anxiety is an instinctual alert within your body telling you there is imminent danger – usually designed for life-or-death scenarios – where you need to employ a fight, flight or freeze response. This system can become so heightened that it can impact your ability to do things, including having blood drawn or injections. The best way to deal with this is to consciously change what you tell yourself. You could write down or visualise how you will successfully cope during a blood test or injection despite the anxiety.

Another technique is exposure therapy. While this sounds scary at first, sometimes the best way is to face your fear – literally. It’s best to start small by looking at pictures of needles or watching a video of someone going for a blood test or injecting themselves. For this technique to work, it’s best to work with a therapist. They can also recommend other psychologically-based treatments like cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT).

**4. Going through with a blood test or injection.**

- Talk to the healthcare professional who will be carrying out the procedure about your needle fear or phobia. Be open about what triggers you and discuss ways to help you cope with the procedure. Lots of healthcare professionals who work with needles have learnt an array of coping strategies from others who are in a similar position.
- You can bring a support person to help distract or support you. Someone familiar can provide much-needed comfort, particularly if you feel anxious or panicked.
- Set yourself a reward once the procedure is over. This can help incentivise you to get through a blood test or injection. It could be as simple as a small treat for yourself or a chance to get out of doing the dishes.
- Remember to utilise relaxation and deep breathing techniques. You could count to four when breathing in, hold for five seconds, and then breathe out for seven.

**5. Seek help from a professional.** Whether or not you are donating your blood stem cells, chances are you will likely need a health-related test or procedure that involves a needle at some point in your life. If you find yourself avoiding scenarios that include needles, it might be time to seek some help from a professional. There are a range of therapy techniques that could help you overcome your fear or phobia. Speak to your GP for assistance.



## When will I encounter a needle during the donation process?

- After you are informed that you are a potential match – you will need to provide a blood sample to verify the match and check for infectious diseases. Your blood will be drawn using a butterfly or similar specially-designed needle inserted into a vein, usually in your arm or hand (or where blood is best accessed).
- If you undergo a peripheral blood stem cell (PBSC) donation:
  - You will receive injections known as G-CSF. These are subcutaneous injections. A very thin needle is used to inject into the fatty tissue, usually found on your stomach or thighs.
  - These injections can be up to twice a day for four days.
  - For some donations, you may be required to inject on the morning of your donation.
  - The PBSC procedure is usually carried out with two cannulas. The first cannula is inserted into one arm, and the second is inserted into the other. One cannula is designed to remove the blood stem cells from your blood via an apheresis machine, while the other transports your remaining blood back into your body. Once the cannulas are in, the needles are removed.
- In some cases, a second donation day is required. You may need another G-CSF injection, followed by another set of cannula needles.
- If you undergo a bone marrow donation:
  - You will require a cannula in your arm to put you under general anesthesia.
  - A thin needle draws marrow from your hips while you are asleep.
  - The cannula in your arm will remain there until you are out of recovery.

Be open and honest to your support person and the healthcare professionals you meet with during your donation journey. We recognise that you don't have to do this and are selflessly helping another human being. We want to do everything we can to support you throughout, including helping you cope. If you are asked to donate or are currently donating, let your Donor Support Coordinator know your concerns, fears, worries or phobias. Our Donor Support Coordinators will work with you and the healthcare professionals to help minimise any discomfort and concerns.

