



Fainting After Shots

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It's flu shot season! That's not necessarily anybody's favorite time of year. But, most people are happy to undergo the minor discomfort of a needle poke to be spared the misery of influenza. For some people though, any shot can be a challenge all by itself, especially for people who faint at the sight, the feel, and sometimes even just the thought of a needle! This common problem happens every day in medical offices, emergency departments, and flu shot clinics.

Doctors classify this phenomenon as "vasovagal syncope." But, it's not a disease or an abnormal condition in these situations. In fact, a normal cardiovascular reflex underlies vasovagal syncope. In certain people this reflex is simply exaggerated for unknown reasons, and can cause them to faint during medical procedures. They usually experience warning signs first, like weakness, a cold sweat, buzzing in the ears, blurred vision, and an unwell sensation. It can happen to men and women of any age, though it is probably most common among adolescent females. Among many people who have fainted with childhood shots, the tendency continues life-long. It is especially likely when shots and other medical procedures are needed in people who already feel faint from dehydration or illness.



Fortunately, there is a nearly sure-fire solution to this vexing, embarrassing, and potentially dangerous problem. It starts by telling the person who is going to give you the shot, that you fainted from a shot previously. Obviously, the right time to tell this is BEFORE they give your shot! Ask if you may lie down WHILE you receive the shot. Don't wait until you're on the verge of black out! And, elevating your legs while lying down to receive the shot nearly guarantees you won't become faint. Drinking plenty of water on the day of the shot also reduces the risk.

But, it's also important to realize that the Vasovagal reaction can also happen in a delayed fashion, up to 15 minutes later. Rarely, it can even be longer. That is why the CDC's Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices in 2006 recommended that all recipients of all vaccines be observed for 15 minutes after vaccination (MMWR 2006;55[RR15]:1-48). Even if you've never had a faint after a shot, it is a good practice to sit or lie down at the health care facility for 15 minutes after receiving the vaccine. A research study showed that fainting happens in less than five minutes in 49 percent of cases, and less than 15 minutes in 80 percent.

If shots have caused you to faint in the past, please don't be embarrassed or feel that it's your fault. It's a normal reaction which simply happens more easily to you. The important thing is to not avoid essential preventive health measures, like flu shots, for fear of fainting. The problem can be solved. But mass immunization at a flu shot clinic needs a special strategy, because your condition requires a few simple preventive steps. Speak up before you get the shot. Ask to lie down, and don't be in any hurry to leave.

That's the best way for you to avoid the flu, and fainting too!