

THE
DOCTOR
ANXIETY
IS REAL

IF JUST THE THOUGHT OF A STETHOSCOPE MAKES YOUR
PALMS SWEAT, YOU'VE COME TO THE RIGHT PLACE.

BY KATHLEEN O'NEILL

Appointment **S.O.S.**

You're seated in a fluorescent-lit exam room, waiting for your doctor to start your annual checkup. The clock ticks loudly, the crinkly paper on the exam table scratches the backs of your legs and your heart is racing a mile a minute. Suddenly, there's a knock on the door... and your stomach drops.

Relatable? If so, you're probably one of the 25% of teens who experience fear related to health care procedures. "There's something about the medical setting that makes us feel exposed, vulnerable and unsure of what's going to happen next. That uncertainty alone is enough to spark anxiety," explains family therapist Sharon Yu.

From nasty needles to uncomfy exams, visits to the doctor aren't exactly enjoyable. But putting off checkups because you're afraid of what might happen? Not only can it be risky for your physical health (keeping up with bloodwork, vaccines and your overall wellness is an important part of being a teen), but it can actually end up making your anxiety worse.

"Avoiding an appointment because it's scary might give you quick relief, but it also teaches your brain that it was something to be afraid of—so next time, it'll feel even bigger and scarier," says Megan Collins, a therapist who works with teens.

That's why learning how to manage your medical anxiety now is so important. Enter: our foolproof tips for facing the fear, no matter what spikes your nerves about your upcoming appointment.

IF YOU'RE SCARED OF NEEDLES...

Getting a shot or a blood draw makes you queasy? You may have trypanophobia, aka fear of needles. Whether you're afraid of the pain, had a bad experience in the past (like fainting after receiving an injection) or simply can't stand the sight of a sharp object, it's super common.

But here's the thing: You probably **will** need to get a shot at some point in your life (most colleges require a series of vaccines, especially if you're living on campus). And putting off basic annual bloodwork could have some serious consequences for your long-term health.

THE PLAN: If you know that a needle will be involved in your appointment, bring your mom, sister or bestie along. Simply having a

hand to hold can give you the confidence to push through.

Also, don't be afraid to tell the staff that you're nervous. If pain is your main concern, call the office ahead of time—you may be able to arrive early so a nurse can apply a numbing agent. You also could bring along a pain-relief device like Buzzy (get one at pincarelabs.com), which uses vibration and ice to help reduce the sting.

During the actual stick, distraction is key: Count the tiles on the ceiling or silently recite the lyrics to your fave song. "My go-to technique is saying the Pledge of Allegiance but skipping every other word," shares Erin K., 16. "It gives my brain something to focus on other than what's happening."

We'll be honest: Needles will probably never be anyone's favorite thing. But the more you face them—and prove to yourself that you can make it through—the easier the whole experience will become.

IF YOU'RE WORRIED ABOUT FEELING EMBARRASSED...

Whether you're dreading disclosing your digestive issues or cringing at the thought of a pelvic exam at the OB-GYN, doctors definitely have a way of getting all up in your business.

"You're at a stage of life where your body is changing and your need for privacy is growing," explains therapist Carol Calkins. "The exam room is a space where someone you barely know is asking personal questions and examining your body. That's a lot to process."

THE PLAN: First, remind yourself that it's pretty hard to faze a medical professional,

Try any of these to help keep your cool in the exam room.

Play a brain game. In your head, name as many ice cream flavors as you can, think of synonyms for a random word or try saying the alphabet backward.

Ground yourself in your senses. Name five things you can see, four you can feel, three you can hear, two you can smell and one you can taste.

Tense and release. Starting with your toes and working your way up your body, gently clench and release each muscle group.

Put on your fave podcast. Or a T-Swift album. Or nature sounds. Most doctors won't mind if you wear headphones.

Hold something substantial. Even better if it has an interesting texture, like a piece of bubble wrap, a worry stone or even your favorite Jellycat.

Plan your reward for when it's over. Just thinking about that iced latte, Sephora run or new PJ set can help you power through the appointment.

who does this kind of stuff for a living. So as funny as it may feel for **you** to bring up bathroom emergencies or vagina questions, remember that it's just another normal day for your doctor.

"Once I reminded myself that my dermatologist has looked at plenty of old people who are saggier and wrinklier than me, I felt less self-conscious about getting a skin check," says Alex M., 15.

Feel free to ask for explanations before anything happens, too. "A completely reasonable question is, 'Can you tell me what you're about to do and why?'" suggests Calkins. Just having your doc walk you through the appointment can make it feel less awkward.

IF YOU THINK YOUR DOC IS JUDGING YOU...

At some point, a doctor is probably going to ask you some pretty personal questions. While it may just seem like they're being way too nosy, it's all important data to get the most accurate picture of your health.

THE PLAN: It may be tempting, but don't omit info (or, worse, lie) to your doctor. That could lead to misdiagnoses, the wrong treatment or skipping over something important altogether—which only leads to bigger problems down the line.

And if a doctor ever makes you feel judged, dismissed or uncomfortable about something you shared, you have the right to leave. "One thing I wish every teen knew is that the doctor works for you. If you don't feel comfortable with the doctor or don't feel they're part of your team, consider getting a new one," says Collins.

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IF YOU'RE AFRAID TO ASK FOR HELP...

There are some things that feel easy to talk to a doc about (like a sore throat or a sprained ankle). But then there are topics that make your stomach somersault. Maybe you have questions about birth control or are struggling with disordered eating—and you're worried someone else might find out. But avoiding the convo will only make it harder to get the resources you need.

THE PLAN: Remind yourself that helping people through sensitive situations is part of your doctor's job. Don't worry about having the perfect script rehearsed—even starting the convo with something like, “This is hard for me to talk about” can take the pressure off.

If part of your stress is worrying that what you say will get reported back to your family, take a breath. While privacy laws depend on your state and the situation, in most cases doctors aren't sharing what you say with your parents. To be sure, you can question confidentiality before revealing anything personal (asking “Will this stay between us?” is OK).

If your parent insists on coming with you to an appointment, try having a conversation beforehand. “I really appreciate you looking out for me, but I think I'd feel more comfortable handling this alone” is a good start.

IF YOU'RE NERVOUS ABOUT NOT BEING IN CONTROL...

For a lot of gals, the scariest part of a doctor's visit isn't the pain or prodding: It's being told where to sit and what to do. It can feel like you have zero say in what's happening to your body. Even small things—like not knowing which exam room you'll be in or what test you need—can send your anxiety reeling.

THE PLAN: First, remind yourself that you're not just a passive patient. Sure, your doc is leading the appointment, but you're allowed to ask Q's and make your needs known.

It also can help to go in with a game plan. “Being active in your medical care can ease some of that fear by empowering you to be involved,” says Yu. Jot down Q's ahead of time so you're not scrambling in the moment.

And think about what would make the experience feel more comfortable, whether that's squeezing a stress ball, wearing your coziest hoodie or treating yourself to boba afterward (highly encouraged). Because the more prepared you feel, the less intimidating those appointments will be. 

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