



TIPS TO HELP WITH BLOOD TESTS ON DAMAGED VEINS OR *HOW TO GET BLOOD OUT OF A STONE*

There used to be a saying you never see any old injecting drug users, well that's no longer true. We *are* around but being an older injecting drug user or someone who has injected for many years in the past comes with certain difficulties related to our mode of taking drugs. Veins were not really designed for repeated injections with sharp or blunt objects followed by various amounts of liquids (often of unknown origin and quality) pushed through their delicate membranes. Veins like all blood vessels are soft, elastic tubes that make up the circulatory part the cardiovascular system. Veins are made of several thin layers of muscle tissue.

Over time constant injecting results in scarring and vein collapse. If you want more information on these issues click on the link below to the AIVL Vein Care Guide to get some excellent information on how to avoid ending up needing this information! <http://www.aivl.org.au/wp-content/uploads/resources/Safer%20Injecting.pdf>

Unless you are really unlucky or been extremely active you can usually, hopefully, find a vein or two that can be used to have blood taken. The nurses may be hesitant to go to unusual sites but if you give them encouragement they will usually oblige. I have found nurses can get a vein even if I can't, so don't give up until you have at least tried. Ask other people who they go to when they need blood tests; they may be able to refer you. As with all things in life some people have a knack for it try – try to find that person.

Depending on you veins and your health needs you may want to talk to your Doctor about the best way to get the tests you need done. You may find that getting a group of tests done at the same time saves you the pain and anxiety of having multiple visits. Alternatively your veins may be so fragile that you need to have as little blood taken at each visit as you can get away with.



Below are tips we have developed from personal experience of having blood tests done ourselves many times. We hope they help you.

TOUCH

You need to develop your sense of touch to find veins that are not obvious. I find myself while showering, in a bath or sitting at the bus stop going up and down my arm waiting to feel that little spongy response that a vein gives if you touch it lightly. Once you get used to the sensation it becomes easy to locate the more hidden ones.

FLUIDS

Our bodies are made up of between 55 and 75 % water. It's important we have enough water circulating around our bodies to keep our veins as plump as possible. This makes them stand out more clearly and easier to find. Everyone who has used opiates, particularly methadone knows how much it can make us sweat. This fluid has to be replaced particularly before a blood test and for this reason, before having blood taken you should consider:

- Drinking water - at least half a litre or 500mls - 20 minutes before the collection so it has time to get into your blood stream. Water is a simple compound which is readily absorbed most of it in the stomach and small intestines. A quick drink on the way up the stairs is better than nothing.
- Drinking tea or coffee about 30 minutes before your appointment can help as they contain chemicals that can assist in vasodilation (dilating your blood vessels). People were told not to drink tea and coffee as they were thought to be diuretics (which can make you pee more). However studies have shown this effect only happens with people who rarely drink coffee or tea.

FOODS

- Make sure you have eaten beforehand as it helps maintain your blood pressure which in turn helps the veins look and feel more prominent.

Of course if your blood test requires that you must fast before the test, the above tip about eating beforehand doesn't apply!



- Some foods have chemicals in them that help the body with vasodilation. These foods need to be eaten on a regular basis rather than just before a test. But it's worthwhile considering adding as many of them as you can regularly to your diet. If you are planning to go on hep C treatment, it is important to remember that the treatment will last for 6-12 months depending on your genotype, so anything you can do to enhance your veins ability to cope will help you to manage the large number of blood tests that hep C treatment necessarily requires.
- *Nitrates* are contained in such foods as spinach, leaf lettuce and beets. When eaten, the saliva in the mouth turns natural nitrates into nitrites which then get swallowed and arrive in the stomach where nitrite is converted into nitric oxide by gastric acid. Nitric oxide is then used by the body to relax and dilate the walls of blood vessels.
- *Flavonoids* play another key role in producing nitric oxide and can be found in foods like broccoli, spinach, kale, hawthorn and dark chocolate. The *amino acid L-arginine* is another powerful vasodilator which research is finding is used by the body to assist with the synthesis of nitric oxide. Natural food sources which supply L-arginine are red meat, chicken, fish, cheese, milk and eggs. You can also obtain it from almonds, walnuts and cashews.

BODY TEMPERATURE

The warmer your body the easier it is to locate veins. There are things you can do at home before you leave and then a few tips on how to keep yourself warm on the journey and in the collection room.

- A warm shower or bath or having energetic sex will all get your heart pumping and your blood circulating.
- If it's close enough, walking at a good pace to your appointment will help boost circulation.
- Wear warm clothes and gloves to the appointment if it's cold.
- Ask the nurse for a warm towel to place on your arm or run your arms under warm water for a minute or two.



THE APPOINTMENT

- Taking some time before going to your appointment about where you think your best veins are or the places you think they will have the best chance of getting blood to save lots of unnecessary digging around.
- Take a friend with you preferably someone who is an experienced street phlebotomist, (vein doctor). They can often advocate for you with the nurse and help suggest likely places for the collection.
- DO NOT repeatedly pump your fist or allow the nurse to repeatedly tap your vein site to assist in getting a vein. This has been known to increase potassium and can interfere with the accuracy of the lab resultsⁱ.
- Do NOT let the person “fish” for a vein – that is pushing the needle around once they penetrate the skin hoping to find the vein. This damages the vein and the surrounding tissue.
- If they don’t hit the vein the first time get them to take the needle out get a new needle and start again.
- Some nurses (very few) will allow you to take your own blood particularly if they have tried and repeatedly failed or the test is so important that they must get a sample. They don’t like doing it as it has implication for due care and probably insurance issues. But it’s worth a try - anything to get the test done.
- After the needle has been removed from the arm, some phlebotomists tell you to bend the arm, but this is wrong. It’s just letting blood escape into the tissues, causing a bruise or hematoma - apply pressure to the site with a clean gauze pad.

THE DOPE

- It’s probably best not to have a shot before your blood test (I know, I know). If you struggle to get a vein you’ll just ruin your veins for the day and getting blood will be much harder if not impossible. Wait till it’s over. The tests are being done for a reason; we need to maximise the chance of success.
- Cigarettes are known vasoconstrictors so it would help if you don’t have a fag for twenty minutes before the appointment.



TIPS TO KEEP VEINS PATENT OR WORKING

Some people swear by Hirudoid cream alone, and others have their own special recipes for keeping their veins in good shape and minimising scarring and bruising from injections. Below is one such recipe a friend of mine swears by; he and his friends have been using it (a lot) for over 15 years.

- Vaseline, Hirudoid cream, Vitamin E, and Cortisone. The Vaseline we found out works better than topical antibiotics in terms of infection. Hirudoid keeps the swelling down and Cortisone generates cellular growth. The vitamin E helps with smoothness of the cream and is a great antioxidant.

We hope this information is useful, if you have any tips or practices that you have found helpful lets us know. So we can spread the word.



