Painless Punctures

Taking away the sting

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“We need not put our children through needless pain,” says Marlene Diaz, mother of a three-year-old HIV positive girl. Shots and blood tests are scary enough, but “what makes this ordeal even worse,” she notes, “is that the children in the clinic waiting areas hear the screaming and crying of kids in the next room.” Luckily, there is a solution, but Diaz says all too few pediatricians and parents know about it.

EMLA cream (manufactured by Astra USA) is a topical anesthetic that takes the pain out of blood draws, skin tests and vaccinations (except intramuscular shots). The cream is thickly applied to the site where the dreaded “stick” will be done; then the skin is covered with a gauze dressing. The numbing effect is felt about an hour later, increasing for up to three hours and persisting for one to two hours after the cream is removed. The cream may be applied immediately on entering a clinic if an hour-long wait is expected, or a prescription can be given for home application.

“This stuff works!” says Mary Jo O’Hara, a pediatric nurse at Children’s Hospital in Newark, New Jersey. “Ask your health care provider so you don’t leave home without it.” She notes that EMLA won’t interfere with any skin tests and has minimal side effects (sometimes causing pale, red or itching skin).

FDA-approved and covered by Medicaid, this treatment isn’t limited to children -- adults dreading the pain of punctures can benefit too. Concludes Diaz, “When EMLA is used, the treatment room and the waiting room become a lot less stressful for everyone.”

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