Insulin Injections: A Step-by-Step Guide

If you’re not a doctor, you may wonder what business you have injecting anyone—even yourself—with anything. But, believe it or not, you’re qualified. Insulin injections have come a long way since the discovery of this miracle medication: They’re quick, usually painless, and simple to do once you have a little practice. If you’re new to insulin or just need a refresher, check out this illustrated guide to getting the good stuff into your body, where it can work its magic.

• Illustrations by Celia Johnson

Step 1: Get ready.
You’ll want to find a place where you can be relaxed while you take care of business. Wash your hands before starting. Assemble your tools: the syringe and insulin vial. Examine the insulin in the vial for lumps, crystals, or discoloration; these are signs that the insulin is no good and should be discarded. If it’s a new bottle, snap off the cap and write the date of opening on the bottle using a permanent marker that won’t get rubbed off later.

Step 2: Prepare the syringe.
Remove the syringe caps. Pull the plunger to fill the syringe with air volume equal to the amount of insulin you plan to inject.

Step 3: Draw the insulin.
Holding the syringe straight, stick the needle into the center of the rubber stopper in the insulin bottle and inject the air into the bottle. Turn the insulin bottle upside down with the needle still inside. Gently draw the desired amount of insulin into the syringe by pulling on the plunger. To get the right dose, line up the top of the plunger with the proper line.
Instead of drawing insulin out of a vial, you’ll screw a special needle onto the tip of the pen. “Prime” the pen by ejecting a drop or two of insulin into the air to remove any bubbles. Then “dial” the desired dose of insulin. Choose your injection site as in Step 6 below. After inserting the needle, press the button to inject the insulin. Wait five seconds before removing the pen to make sure all the insulin is injected. Then remove the needle. Discard it in a sharps container.

**Step 4: Check for and remove bubbles.**
While the needle is still upside down in the insulin bottle, gently tap the side of the syringe to allow any bubbles to float to the top. Push any bubbles out of the syringe with the plunger, and then draw insulin back into the syringe to get the correct dose. Remove the needle from the bottle.

**Step 5: Choose an injection site.**
Pick your spot. You want to use a part of the body with a nice fat pad—like the abdomen (avoiding a 2-inch ring around your belly button), thighs, buttocks, or the fat on the back of the arm. Avoid injecting near moles or scar tissue. Make sure to rotate injection sites each time you take your insulin to avoid infection or irritation. Injection sites should be no less than a finger length apart.

**Step 6: Prepare the injection site.**
Pinch up a nice, thick fold of skin. People with ample fatty tissue can put the needle straight in, at 90 degrees to the body. Thin adults or children may need to angle the injection at 45 degrees. You may want to discuss the angle of injection with a health care provider. No matter what angle you choose, push the needle in and pull it out straight to avoid bruising.

**Step 7: Inject.**
When you’re ready, bring the needle to the skin surface and push in. Push down the plunger slowly until all insulin has been injected. Wait five seconds, then release skin and pull out the needle. Don’t recap the needle—you could accidentally poke yourself or forget that the syringe is used. Dispose of the used syringe in a sharps container. You’re done!