

FROM CONCERN TO CONFIDENCE: How Physicians Can Build Trust in COVID-19 Vaccines

Ending the COVID-19 pandemic requires us to vaccinate as many Americans as possible. The new vaccines offer our best path toward saving lives, opening schools and businesses, and rebuilding our economy.

The decision to get vaccinated is a personal one that is influenced by many factors. Research shows that Americans most trust their own doctor for information about COVID-19 and vaccines. People want unbiased facts about the safety and effectiveness of the vaccines – and information about whether vaccination is the right choice for them – from their doctor.

The nation is making good progress in getting more people vaccinated, but many still say they will probably not get the vaccine. While numerous national and local efforts are attempting to address people's concerns, the single most influential factor will be a *strong recommendation* from a medical professional.

HERE ARE **6** THINGS YOU CAN DO TO IMPROVE VACCINE ACCEPTANCE AMONG YOUR PATIENT FAMILIES.

- 1 Lead by example.**
Get vaccinated and encourage your entire staff to be vaccinated.
- 2 Prepare your health care team, pharmacy teams, and staff to have these conversations.**
Ask your staff members if they'd be willing to speak with their colleagues and patients about why they got vaccinated. All staff should be equipped to answer basic questions about COVID vaccines.
- 3 Share educational materials widely.**
Post information in the waiting room, the staff break room, and common areas in your facility. Publish information on your website, intranet, and social media platforms. Include a way for people to contact you with questions.
- 4 During patient visits, make the COVID-19 vaccine a new vital sign.** Ask every patient what their vaccination plan is. For those who say they will take it, make sure they know how and where to schedule an appointment. If they say they're not sure, discuss their concerns and answer their questions.
- 5 Partner with your health department, employers, and others to engage with community members.** Collaborate with trusted messengers – like faith-based leaders, local employers, and other community leaders – to tailor and share culturally relevant messages and materials.
- 6 Consider sending a letter or email to your patients.**
Start by expressing your concern for the health of your patients and their loved ones. Provide facts, refer them to additional resources, and offer to answer questions. See sample language on page 4.

MESSAGING THAT WORKS

In recent research, people have said that these messages would make them more likely to get vaccinated for COVID-19. This can be used in social media, emails, or almost any other communication.

- *The vaccines are highly effective in preventing illness -- even more effective than the annual flu vaccine.*
- *The COVID vaccine will help protect you from getting sick.*
- *The quickest way for life to return to normal is for most people to get vaccinated.*
- *Nearly all doctors who have been offered the vaccine have taken it.*
- *Millions of people have been vaccinated safely. Tens of thousands of people participated in the phase 3 trials for the three authorized vaccines. After being fully vaccinated, no trial participants were hospitalized or died from COVID-19.*

• ADDRESSING CONCERNS ABOUT SIDE EFFECTS:

- *Severe side effects are rare and treatable. Minor side effects usually go away within a few days.*
- *No one can say for sure if there will be any long-term effects will be, but there is no reason to think there will be.*
- *The FDA and CDC will continue to monitor the vaccines for safety to make sure that even very rare side effects are identified.*

• ADDRESSING CONCERNS ABOUT THE RAPID DEVELOPMENT OF VACCINES:

- *The COVID vaccines have been held to the same rigorous standards as other vaccines. The government didn't cut corners; it cut red tape to expedite the approval process.*
- *While the vaccines were developed quickly, they weren't created from scratch. Researchers have been studying and working with mRNA vaccines (Pfizer and Moderna) for decades, and scientists began creating viral vectors (Johnson & Johnson) in the 1970s.*
- *Viral vector vaccines have been used successfully to treat cancer and prevent diseases like the flu, Zika, and HIV; mRNA vaccines have been studied for the flu, Zika, rabies, and other diseases.*

• ADDRESSING MISINFORMATION:

It would be impossible to counter all the misinformation that's being spread about COVID vaccines. But these are some of the most important facts.

- *The vaccines cannot give you COVID-19.*
- *The vaccines don't affect or interact with your DNA in any way.*
- *The vaccine does not stay in your body.*

Stay up to date on misinformation and how to address it by following the Misinformation Alerts provided by the Public Health Communications Collaborative: <https://publichealthcollaborative.org>

TALKING TO PATIENTS

Every patient interaction is an opportunity to share information and answer questions about COVID-19 vaccines. Here are research-based suggestions for productive conversations about COVID-19 vaccines.

- **START FROM A PLACE OF EMPATHY AND UNDERSTANDING.**

Acknowledge the disruption that COVID-19 has caused in all our lives. Remind patients that getting vaccinated is the most important thing they can do to move back toward normal activities. Recognize that it's normal for someone to have concerns about a new vaccine for a new virus. Encourage them to ask questions, and answer in a way they can understand.

- **ACKNOWLEDGE THAT GETTING VACCINATED IS A PERSONAL DECISION.**

A physician's role is to provide information and answer questions so patients can make the decision that's right for them and their loved ones.

- **STATE CLEARLY WHAT WE KNOW AND WHAT WE DON'T KNOW.**

Don't overemphasize "potentials" (either potential risks or potential benefits). Contrast the known long-term effects of COVID-19 with the unknown potential risks of the vaccines.

- **FOCUS ON THE BENEFITS OF GETTING A COVID VACCINE.**

Not just the consequences of not getting vaccinated. Emphasize that the benefits of getting the vaccine far exceed the risks.

- **EXPLAIN THE HEALTH RISKS ASSOCIATED WITH DECLINING TO BE VACCINATED.**

And tailor that conversation for the patient you're talking to, from your perspective as their physician.

- **MAKE IT PERSONAL.**

Be prepared for the questions "Did you get vaccinated?" and "Did your family members?" If you're comfortable, consider discussing your own decision to be vaccinated.

- **AFTER YOU'VE TALKED, TELL THEM THAT YOU ARE OPEN TO CONTINUING THE CONVERSATION, AND ENCOURAGE THEM TO TAKE AT LEAST ONE STEP.**

That may include scheduling a vaccination appointment, reviewing information you provide about the safety and importance of the vaccines, or learning when they will be eligible and what to expect.

- **BE DIRECT:**

- o *I strongly recommend that you get a COVID-19 vaccine when it's available to you.*
- o *This vaccine is especially important for you because of your [job function/underlying health condition].*
- o *I believe in this vaccine so strongly that I got it as soon as I could, and I made sure everyone in my family did too.*

SAMPLE LANGUAGE FOR LETTERS, EMAILS, OR OTHER COMMUNICATION

VERSION A – FROM VACCINATED PHYSICIAN

Before I made the decision to get a COVID-19 vaccine, I took time to review the facts and the science. I was convinced that the vaccines are very effective and safe. In fact, after being fully vaccinated, none of the tens of thousands of trial participants were hospitalized or died from COVID-19. That gave me the confidence I needed to get the vaccine as soon as it was offered to me.

If you're still trying to decide if you'll get a COVID vaccine, I strongly recommend that you get vaccinated as soon as it's available to you. Your health, and the health of our community, is incredibly important to me, and the COVID-19 vaccine will help protect you and your loved ones from getting sick. And it will help us all get back to doing the things we love.

I want to make sure you have the information you need to make the decision that's right for you. If you have any questions, please [[contact our office](#)].

If you need to schedule an appointment to be vaccinated, visit [[local registration link](#)].

VERSION B – GENERIC

Getting a vaccine is an important and personal decision, and when I heard the FDA had authorized vaccines for COVID-19, I had questions. I did my research and found that the vaccines available today are safe and very effective. Serious side effects are rare and treatable, and minor side effects, like a sore arm, usually go away within a few days.

Your health, and the health of our community, is incredibly important to me. The COVID-19 vaccine will help protect you and your loved ones from getting sick. And it will help us all get back to doing the things we love.

If you haven't been vaccinated yet, I strongly recommend that you get a COVID-19 vaccine when it's available to you. If you have any questions, please [[contact our office](#)].

If you need to schedule an appointment to be vaccinated, visit [[local registration link](#)].

RESOURCES

- Public Health Communications Collaborative <http://publichealthcollaborative.org>
- COVID-10 Vaccines Guide for Physicians, American Medical Association <https://www.ama-assn.org/delivering-care/public-health/covid-19-vaccines-guide-physicians>
- CDC communication toolkits <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/vaccines/resource-center.html>
- "The Language of Vaccine Acceptance" cheat sheet https://debeaumont.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/VaccineToolkit_1pger.pdf
- AAP COVID-19 Vaccine for Children <https://services.aap.org/en/pages/2019-novel-coronavirus-covid-19-infections/covid-19-vaccine-for-children>

Sources: These tips were developed by the de Beaumont Foundation based on recent research on effective messaging about vaccines, as well as information from the American Medical Association, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, and the American Academy of Pediatrics. Get more language tips at www.changingthecovidconversation.com.

