

# **Eight Tips for Addressing COVID-19 Vaccine Hesitancy Among Patients**

**Laura M. Cascella, MA, CPHRM**

PEACE OF MIND

EXPERTISE

CHOICE

THE MEDPRO GROUP DIFFERENCE

Mid-December 2020 marked the arrival of the first shipments of COVID-19 vaccines in the United States, starting the long and complex journey toward ending a pandemic that has taken an astronomical toll on society. Although initial vaccine supplies will be limited and reserved for high-risk individuals, it is expected that more widespread vaccine availability will occur in the spring and summer of 2021, allowing the general population to begin receiving the initial doses.

Large-scale distribution and administration of COVID-19 vaccines pose many challenges for state and local governments, health agencies, public health officials, and healthcare providers. Issues such as maintaining cold chain, storing, training, prioritizing, tracking, and more must be addressed. Yet, another significant hurdle for inoculating the population at large and achieving herd immunity looms that isn't logistical: vaccine hesitancy.

Numerous polls conducted throughout 2020 show that the number of Americans willing to get a COVID-19 vaccine has fluctuated. A Gallup poll conducted in November 2020 shows that willingness has increased, but almost 40 percent of individuals still said they would not get vaccinated.<sup>1</sup> Further, those who are willing to get the vaccine might not plan to do so when it first becomes available to them. Rather, they may choose a “watch and wait” approach as a precaution.

The reasons for vaccine hesitancy are multifactorial and might include concerns about pain and/or adverse reactions; worries about the thoroughness of vaccine research and development; lack of awareness or false beliefs about COVID-19; concerns about freedom of

choice; distrust of the government, pharmaceutical companies, or healthcare officials; and concerns about vaccine effectiveness.

Healthcare providers will likely encounter patients with vaccine hesitancy and — because of the complexity involved in these issues — might have to spend time educating, raising awareness, providing guidance, and having potentially difficult conversations. Fortunately, most people trust healthcare providers as a credible source for vaccine information, and the time spent addressing vaccine concerns can prove valuable for patients and society.

To proactively prepare for the rollout of vaccines in the coming months, providers should consider how to engage patients in vaccine discussions and effectively address concerns and misinformation. The following eight tips can help providers frame their conversations and improve communication with patients:

1. Consider outreach opportunities to engage patients early and often in discussions about COVID-19 vaccines using credible, fact-based information. Examples of outreach might include posting facts or frequently asked questions about the vaccines on your website or social media accounts; recording a video to address patient concerns; or sending email, text, or portal messages with updates about vaccine information and timelines.
2. Acknowledge that conflicting information about COVID-19 vaccines from various sources has created confusion and contradictions. Let patients know what you have done to build your knowledge base about vaccines, and reassure them that you are following national recommendations and best practices — and that you will continue to monitor for new information and guidance.
3. Listen to patients without interrupting, and acknowledge their fears and concerns. Showing patients that you care about their point of view will help foster trust and may help alleviate anxiety about COVID-19 vaccines.
4. Be aware of how nonverbal communication can affect the provider-patient encounter. Certain facial expressions might be interpreted as judgmental (e.g., raising eyebrows, smirking, or head shaking), which may cause patients to be less willing to share concerns or listen to advice or guidance.

5. Keep in mind that patients' confusion or misperceptions about vaccine information might be related to health literacy and comprehension issues. Provide patients with verbal and written information in plain language that highlights the most important points they need to know. Gauge their understanding of information using a method such as the [teach-back technique](#).
6. Use a presumptive approach rather than a participatory approach when communicating with patients about vaccines. A presumptive approach assumes that patients are planning to accept your vaccine recommendation. This approach has proven effective in addressing other types of vaccine hesitancy, such with parents of pediatric patients.<sup>2</sup> Note, however, that this approach is not meant to coerce patients into getting a vaccine. Each patient is different, and providers should determine which communication approach is appropriate.
7. Have honest conversations with patients regarding the benefits and risks of vaccination, including potential side effects and adverse outcomes. Let patients know that all vaccines carry risks, but the decision not to get vaccinated also has risks. Give patients rational guidance for weighing risks versus benefits.
8. Encourage patients to ask questions, and be prepared to answer them. Patients will undoubtedly have numerous questions about vaccine development, safety, efficacy, side effects, immunity, and more. Understanding their concerns and providing information in a way that they can understand will help patients make informed decisions about their care.

For more information about having effective vaccine conversations with patients, visit the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's [Preparing for COVID-19 Vaccination](#) webpage, which includes guidance for talking with patients about vaccines, making recommendations for vaccination, and answering common patient questions.

## Endnotes

---

<sup>1</sup> Brenan, M. (2020, December 8). Willingness to get COVID-19 vaccine ticks up to 63% in U.S. Gallup. Retrieved from <https://news.gallup.com/poll/327425/willingness-covid-vaccine-ticks.aspx>

<sup>2</sup> Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2018, April). Talking with parents about vaccines for infants. Retrieved from <https://www.cdc.gov/vaccines/hcp/conversations/talking-with-parents.html>

---

This document does not constitute legal or medical advice and should not be construed as rules or establishing a standard of care. Because the facts applicable to your situation may vary, or the laws applicable in your jurisdiction may differ, please contact your attorney or other professional advisors if you have any questions related to your legal or medical obligations or rights, state or federal laws, contract interpretation, or other legal questions.

MedPro Group is the marketing name used to refer to the insurance operations of The Medical Protective Company, Princeton Insurance Company, PLICO, Inc. and MedPro RRG Risk Retention Group. All insurance products are underwritten and administered by these and other Berkshire Hathaway affiliates, including National Fire & Marine Insurance Company. Product availability is based upon business and/or regulatory approval and/or may differ among companies.

© 2020 MedPro Group Inc. All rights reserved.