

8 communication strategies to boost COVID-19 vaccine acceptance

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About 31% of U.S. adults are hesitant, reluctant or distrusting of the COVID-19 vaccines, according to a Kaiser Family Foundation poll. But with the U.S. surpassing the grim milestone of 500,000 people lost to COVID-19, vaccination is critical to achieving herd immunity, protecting the most vulnerable populations and reopening the country.

Authors of a consensus study report published by the National Academy of Sciences, Engineering and Medicine, *Strategies for Building Confidence in the COVID-19 Vaccines*, emphasize that reaching people who are hesitant is the most effective way to increase uptake.

The AMA offers a COVID-19 vaccines guide for physicians to help build trust in vaccine safety and efficacy. Here are eight of the best practices listed in the academies' report to build confidence in COVID-19 vaccines.

Meet people where they are

Messaging for people who are willing and need more information about vaccination will be different than for those who are hesitant, yet open to learning more about COVID-19 vaccines. But do not put resources into persuading those who are completely opposed to vaccination—this is only a small portion of the population.

Read about what doctors wish patients knew about COVID-19 vaccination.

Avoid repeating false claims

Emphasize facts over misinformation. When misinformation is repeated, it risks amplifying and strengthening false claims. When in a situation where addressing vaccine misinformation is unavoidable, the report recommends warning patients before confronting them by saying, “The following claim is misleading.”

Tailor message to specific group

If the information provided is not relevant or responsive to diverse audiences' needs, the information will get ignored. A successful communication strategy should emphasize population segmentation and use appropriate approaches to reach vaccine-hesitant audiences.

Discover 10 tips for talking with patients about COVID-19 vaccines.

Adapt message as circumstances change

What influences a person's decisions now is likely to shift as time goes on. This is often due to individual experiences, media coverage and changes in the trajectory of the pandemic and the country's response to it, says the report. Using rapid research methodologies can help identify relevant priorities, specific message formats, trusted messengers and appropriate message frequency.

Respond to adverse events

While serious adverse reactions to COVID-19 vaccines are rare, they receive disproportionate attention in the news and on social media, says the report. If an adverse event occurs, be transparent and share information in a timely manner. Additionally, acknowledge that post-vaccination surveillance is vital for identifying rare outcomes that might be vaccine related.

Learn more with the AMA about answering health professionals' COVID-19 vaccination questions.

Identify trusted messengers

When people trust the person or institution that is delivering messages about COVID-19 vaccination, it can increase credibility. However, it is important to note that different groups have different trusted messengers. They also have preferred media and communications channels. First, identify trust gaps in communities. Then find trusted sources to carry public health messages to fill in those gaps.

Read this Q&A with a Hattiesburg Clinic physician who gives TV viewers a trusted voice on COVID-19

Emphasize support for vaccines

People often turn to their peers for cues on how to behave, says the report. By making vaccine uptake visible, rather than focusing on the naysayers, it can encourage vaccine acceptance as a social norm. For example, vaccine sites can provide “I got vaccinated” stickers or encourage people to post on social media after receiving their COVID-19 vaccine.

Leverage trusted vaccine endorsers

Partnering with people who have strong community relationships with experts and adapting messages as needed. For example, barbers and beauticians can partner with local health professionals to talk about the vaccine. Another option is working with celebrities who can host health experts for discussions on social media or other platforms.

The AMA has published a resource to answer COVID-19 vaccine FAQs for physicians, along with a resource to help physicians and practice staff answer patient inquiries about COVID-19 vaccinations

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