

COVID-19 Vaccination Conversation Guide

How to have open and respectful conversations about the COVID-19 vaccine.

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Your guide to open and respectful conversations.

When you're ready to talk with someone you care about—or when someone tells you they are hesitant to become vaccinated—a road map can help you identify the best ways to have those conversations.



Start talking. Then ask to talk again.

Take your time. The main goal is to open the person's mind to the possibility of eventually getting the vaccine. Everything doesn't need to be said in a single conversation. Start talking. Then ask to talk again. Talk as many times as it takes. It's all about what works best for you and the person you are talking with.

Keep these key points in mind as you consider having a conversation about the vaccine:

- Understand that someone's concerns or worries are real to them.
- Listen with a sincere intention to understand a different viewpoint.
- Be curious and open to learning.
- Suspend judgment and extend grace.
- Keep the door open for future conversations.
- Aim to open their mind, not change their mind.

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These conversations may bring up uncomfortable emotions for both you and the other person.

Use this guide to find caring and respectful ways to make the conversations easier.

Step 1

Prepare for a Conversation

Before you begin a conversation, think about how best to prepare yourself to be in a good frame of mind. It's helpful to have a few ideas about how you want to talk to someone and how you want to behave.

Keep these tips in mind:

Don't argue. Start with kindness. Mention things you share in common. Speak without judgment. Make your conversations a safe space for someone who is unsure about the vaccine.

Be patient. Most of us don't change our mind overnight. It may take many conversations to help someone decide to consider becoming vaccinated. Being respectful and understanding means you can have more conversations.

Be safe. Ensure safe COVID-19 protocols when having conversations with unvaccinated people.

Let them lead. Let the other person decide if they want to engage in a conversation and how long they want the conversation to continue. Be ready to stop at any point and continue another day.

Know your own triggers. It's easy to feel frustrated. Vaccination has become an emotional issue for many people. Staying calm will be more effective. Be ready to take a breath, switch topics, or take a break and ask to pick up the conversation again at another time. It's OK to say, "Thank you for sharing your views with me. When can we talk again?"

Listen Well

One of the most effective ways to have open conversations is to listen well. You know you are listening well when you give someone your full attention, put your thoughts and feelings aside, and make them feel comfortable with sharing.

While you are in a conversation with someone:

Pay attention to your body language. Try to be at the same eye level, lean forward and avoid crossing your arms, using strong hand gestures or checking your phone.

Listen to understand. Look for opportunities to ask, in your own words, questions such as, "Can you tell me more about your concerns and how that feels?" Rather than thinking about what to say next, try to focus on their words and the feelings they express.

Be curious and open to learning. It's helpful to make sure you understand what they've said, so you might say something like, "I hear you are worried about the vaccine. What kind of things are you worried about?"

Suspend judgment and extend grace. Rather than contradicting what they believe to be true, validate the emotion they express. "That sounds really difficult/scary/confusing/frustrating."



Step 2

Start a Conversation

Sometimes, starting the first conversation is the highest hurdle to overcome. Here are some potential questions to encourage meaningful dialogue.

1. Help them identify other decision-makers.

“Who do you usually turn to when you need to make important decisions that require someone else’s feedback?”

“Is there someone who should be with us while we talk about the vaccine?”

2. Help them assess their understanding of the vaccine.

“What have your healthcare providers told you about the vaccine?”

“Can you tell me more about your view on the COVID-19 vaccine?”

3. Help them define goals for getting vaccinated.

“What are you looking forward to doing in the next few months?”

“What is important to you?”

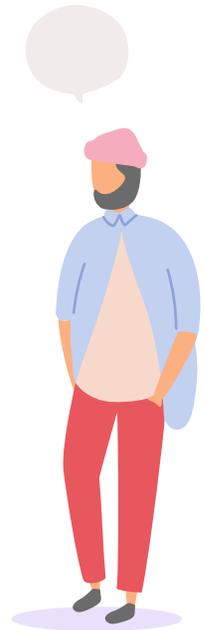
4. State their goals to let them know you hear them and you care.

“I wish we could guarantee that you won’t get COVID-19 after you’re vaccinated. What we do know is that, when someone who is vaccinated gets the virus, their symptoms usually aren’t as severe. We also know that most people hospitalized because of COVID-19 are not vaccinated, and their symptoms are very severe, even fatal.”

“When my sister came to me with her concern about the vaccine, we got to talk through her fears that the vaccine might interfere with her dream of starting a family in the future. I was able to hear her concerns, and I was able to share how much I care about her. We each walked away with a better understanding of each other’s perspective and left the door open to talk more.”

–Jennifer B.

Example of a firsthand
COVID-19 vaccine
conversation



Step 2

During a Conversation

Find out why they are hesitating. You can explore someone's concerns once you understand why they are reluctant. Don't assume you know their concerns. It could be misinformation, fear about existing health issues, faith beliefs, financial concerns, politics or something else. Let them tell you. Don't shame or criticize them no matter the reason. Validate their emotions without agreeing with information that is false.

Find out who else agrees with them. It's important to know who else a person trusts. This group includes people they connect with and share experiences with. It could be family members, friends, co-workers or their faith community. Ask if they know someone among their family and friends who has been vaccinated. Ask what they respect about that person. Vaccine hesitancy may decline when someone in their group gets vaccinated.

Remember this is a conversation. Let the other person speak. Listen when they do. A good idea so that people know you are listening respectfully is to repeat what you've heard back to them.

The conversation could look like:

- "It sounds like you feel strongly about this."
- "I'm hearing that your top priority right now is having a family."
- "The potential side effects of the vaccine are an important concern for you."

Also, the statement "I understand what you're saying" can be a simple phrase that doesn't mean you agree. It means you are listening.

Share your own experience. People value hearing about firsthand experiences, especially when they are shared by someone they trust. Try sharing your experience of being vaccinated and how the vaccine has kept you safer and healthier during the pandemic.

Share Information

You may have an opportunity to share information from trusted sources or explain something from an alternative perspective.

- It's helpful to start by asking what information they already have.
- Ask for permission. Reaffirm your intention by starting with an opener such as, "I'm here to listen and support you. Can I share my understanding of the vaccine with you?"
- Give information in small amounts and as clearly as possible.
- Recognize when a person isn't open to hearing additional information, and avoid conflict. Sometimes it's best to reaffirm what you have heard them say and thank them for being open with you.



Step 2

Examples of Meaningful Conversations

It's helpful to have a goal before having a challenging conversation. You can't control what someone else will do, but you can set an achievable goal for yourself.

Your goals might look like these:

- I will learn more about why this person hesitates to get vaccinated.
- I will convey that I care about this person.
- I will connect with this person based on what we have in common.

Conversation Goal:

Convey that you care about their well-being.

- Ask permission.
- Tell the truth.
- Avoid arguing about specific facts or information.

Helpful Dialogue:

"I'm here to listen and support you."

"From all I've read, I believe the vaccine is experimental. It hasn't been proven safe yet."

"Experimental vaccines do sound scary. There is a lot of information and it doesn't all match up. I'm here to listen and support you. Can I share with you my experience with the vaccine?"

"Yes. How was it for you?"

"I'm glad we talked about this. Whatever you decide, I feel better knowing we had this conversation."

Conversation Goal:

Establish or reaffirm your trust by listening actively.

- Ask questions.
- Reaffirm you have heard their concerns.
- Ask permission to continue the conversation.

Helpful Dialogue:

"Tell me more about your view on the COVID-19 vaccine."

"I'm scared I won't be able to get pregnant if I get vaccinated."

"It sounds like having a family is your top priority right now. Would it be OK if I do some research so we can understand more about how the vaccine would affect that?"

Step 2

Examples of Meaningful Conversations

Conversation Goal:

Share your personal experience.

- Ask permission to share.
- Be honest about your experience without exaggerating.

Helpful Dialogue:

“I’ve heard the side effects from the vaccine are really bad.”

“Yes, I have heard there is a wide range of reactions to the vaccine, and some are affected more than some people. Can I share with you my experience after getting the vaccine?”

“If I am one of the people that is affected, I’m worried I won’t be able to take time off work.”

“I understand how that can be difficult for you. There may be help for you that we aren’t aware of. Could I look into some resources that might be available, such as financial assistance from the local health department to take time off work?”

Conversation Goal:

Leave the door open for future conversations.

- Acknowledge their beliefs and emotions.
- Acknowledge your intentions are coming from a place of caring about for their safety and well-being.

Helpful Dialogue:

“If you have time, I’d like to hear more about why you don’t want to get the vaccine.”

“It’s just not safe. I’ve read a lot, and I know it’s not safe. It’s way safer to get COVID than to get the vaccine.”

“So in what you’ve read, it says that COVID is safer than getting the vaccine. That’s different from my understanding. Can you share more about what you’ve read?”

Explain further while you listen, reflect back, and use your body language to show that you hear them.

“Thanks for sharing that. Would you be open to hearing my view sometime? I know we feel differently and that’s OK. I just really care about you. I would feel more confident that you’ll be safe if I knew you were vaccinated. No matter what you decide, though, I’m here for you.”

Step 3

Additional Support

If someone has questions about the vaccine and how it might impact their health, it might be helpful for them to speak to a healthcare provider. If they are distressed or have anxious feelings about getting COVID-19 or the vaccine, giving them a safe space to talk can help.

Takeaways

Talking about sensitive topics with friends, loved ones and co-workers is a skill that can be learned and developed. With caring and honest dialogue and an intention to listen, your conversations about the COVID-19 vaccine might open someone's mind. Each conversation will be different and these key takeaways can help guide them.

- Talking to someone who is hesitant about getting the COVID-19 vaccine can help them express their concerns and fears, and perhaps open their mind.
- Talking about the COVID-19 vaccine can be uncomfortable, but there are things you can do to help the conversation be more meaningful.
- If someone doesn't want to talk about the vaccine, let them know that they can talk to you later if they change their mind.
- Be honest if you don't know something. You can try to find out and tell them later.
- It's best to aim for opening someone's mind through a series of conversations. Don't try to change their mind.



Step 3

Frequently Asked Questions

Q. What can empathy look and sound like?

- Sits down, leans in, makes eye contact
- Is mostly pretty quiet
- Digs deep for common ground
- Asks open-ended questions (It's not open-ended if "yes" or "no" can be the answer.)
- Pays attention to pronouns. Say "I think" or "I hear that." Sentences that start in "you" can sound blaming. When possible, start with "we" and "us" rather than "you" and "them."
- Uses nonverbal elements that match the conversation
- Smile: "That sounds like a good idea/good memory."
- Grimace: "I can't imagine. That sounds so difficult/painful."
- Don't nod unless you really agree.

Q. What if the conversation becomes emotional?

If you can respond to the emotion with reassurance or validation, do so. "This is difficult and I'm here for you," or "This is making you angry. Do you want to talk about that?" Another option is to redirect the conversation and drop the topic of the vaccine. Instead, talk about something you have in common to remind the person of the bond you share.

Q. What if a loved one wants to debate the science (or religious views) about the COVID-19 vaccine?

Debates over science (or religion) may not help. Consider acknowledging the difference in views: "Your understanding is different from mine," or "There is so much information out there and I think we are using different sources." If appropriate, ask clarifying questions that may lead the person to think through what they are saying: "Can you tell me more about how what you're saying might work?"

Q. What if someone mistrusts their healthcare provider?

Reply with concern and offer to hear about the experience that led to losing trust. You don't have to validate what happened. However, you can validate how the person feels about it: "It sounds like you didn't feel heard during that visit," or "I'm hearing that you don't feel good about the care you received."

Q. Is there a bad time to discuss the vaccine with someone who is hesitant?

You will know it is the wrong time if you start the conversation and find yourself unable to listen, or your own emotions become difficult to manage. Thank the person and ask when would be a good time to continue talking.

Example of a firsthand COVID-19 vaccine conversation

“My neighbor asked me if their 12-year-old child needed the vaccine. ‘He’s not going to get very sick if he gets COVID anyway, right?’ I told her it was likely her son wouldn’t get very sick from COVID-19. Then I asked why she was concerned about him getting the vaccine. ‘Well, it’s so new. I made the choice for me but it’s harder to decide for him. What if it has some terrible side effect we don’t know about yet?’ I agreed that making health decisions for our children feels more difficult, even when we’re comfortable getting vaccinated ourselves. Then I circled back to her first comment. ‘You know how we said the chance of him getting seriously sick from COVID is low? Well, his chances of getting a bad effect from the vaccine are even lower. I’m just mentioning that in case it helps you decide. Whatever you choose, your son is so fortunate you are thinking this through so carefully.’”

–Sarah D.

For more information about
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