

Talking about the SARS-CoV-2 (COVID-19) Vaccine

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As we all continue to struggle against the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, many of us are grappling with the vexing and troubling problem of convincing some of our patients to take the vaccine. While there is no known method to convince all eligible patients who have not yet received the vaccine, below are some tips that may encourage some to do so, and continue compassionate care for those remaining unwilling to take these remarkably safe & effective tools in our fight against the pandemic:

1. Start the conversation. Say **“Tell me, what are your thoughts about the COVID vaccine?”** Once you have established that a patient has not yet received the vaccine, ask a question that gives them room to share their reasons for not doing so. Try to ask a question or make a statement that cannot be answered with a “yes” or “no.” For example, you might say **“Ok. Please help me understand what is making you hesitant to get the vaccine.”** Alternatively, you might say **“what would need to happen in order for you to take the vaccine?”**

2. Attempt to adopt radical empathy. Try your hardest to imagine things from your patient’s perspective. Note that this does not mean agreeing with or condoning a patient’s perspective, only trying to put yourself in their shoes, if only for a short while. For example, a patient might say “I am not getting the vaccine because I have heard the side effects are really bad and you can still get the virus even if you are vaccinated.” Before jumping into correct the factual errors in a patient’s response, take a moment to imagine what it would be like to truly believe the reason that they give, even if it seems silly and factually incorrect.

3. Express empathy for their position. Once you have imagined what the world might look like to them, attempt to affirm their feeling, if not their conclusion. For the example statement above, an expression of empathy might be something like **“I hear you. You just don’t see how it is going to make any positive difference for you or your family. If I were you, I also would not want to put something in my body that might hurt me more than it would help me.”** This can help signal to the patient that you are listening to them and to help them reduce guardedness.

4. Make a quick judgement of how resistant to the vaccine a patient appears.

- If it is clear that the patient has no openness to taking the vaccine, that is important to establish early. For example, if a patient says “There is no way in hell I am putting that poison in my body, so don’t even try to convince me,” take them at their word. You might say **“I appreciate your candor. We’ll move on to the reason for your visit today. I’ll check in with you again about the vaccine the next time I see you to see if anything has changed.”** This will save time by not engaging in a discussion with a patient who has already made up their mind, help you to preserve the longitudinal care relationship you have with the patient, and likely leave you less frustrated that a fruitless argument.

4. Make a quick judgement of how resistant to the vaccine a patient appears.

b. On the other hand, if the patient expresses hesitancy but uncertainty, build on your previous expression of empathy to try to help them come to accept the vaccine. This can include asking permission to offer some new information, or reflecting back a portion of their previous statement in an attempt to help resolve ambivalence in the direction of change. For example, for the patient statement at the top of this page, a clinician might respond with **“You need to be convinced that the benefits outweigh the risks in order to take the vaccine.”**

5. Get patients the vaccine on the same day of their visit.

If successful in convincing the patient to take the vaccine, do all you can do to get them to take it before they leave the clinic. We know that social groups exert powerful influence over the choices we all make. Many people who have not yet taken the vaccine are surrounded by others who have also not taken it, and are consistently giving explicit and implicit messages to our non-vaccinated patients that taking the vaccine is a bad idea. An ambivalent patient who comes to a place of readiness to accept the vaccine will likely not remain there long if they return to an environment in which they are bombarded by anti-vaccination messages. Strike while the iron is hot.

Start the conversation

Tell me, what are your thoughts about the COVID vaccine?

Get more information

What would need to happen in order for you to take the vaccine?

Ok. Please help me understand what is making you hesitant to get the vaccine.

Express empathy

I hear you. You just don't see how it is going to make any positive difference for you or your family. If I were you, I also would not want to put something in my body that might hurt me more than it would help me.

Respond to refusal

I appreciate your candor. We'll move on to the reason for your visit today. I'll check in with you again about the vaccine the next time I see you to see if anything has changed.

Reflect ambivalence

You need to be convinced that the benefits outweigh the risks in order to take the vaccine.