

Global experts urge everyone to talk about COVID-19 vaccines responsibly

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A team of renowned scientific experts has joined forces from across the world to help fight the spread of misinformation about the COVID-19 vaccines, which hold the key to beating the deadly pandemic and

releasing countries from debilitating lockdown restrictions.

Together they have created a unique online guide, published today and led by the University of Bristol, to arm people with practical tips combined with the very latest information and evidence to talk reliably about the vaccines, constructively challenge associated myths, and allay fears.

With the race on to vaccinate as many people as possible soonest in the wake of a more virulent virus strain, they're appealing to everyone, from doctors to politicians, teachers to journalists and parents to older generations, to understand the facts, follow the guidance, and spread the word.

Lead author Professor Stephan Lewandowsky, Chair in Cognitive Psychology at the University of Bristol, said: "Vaccines are our ticket to freedom and communication about them should be our passport to getting everyone on board. The way all of us refer to and discuss the COVID-19 vaccines can literally help win the battle against this devastating virus by tackling misinformation and improving uptake, which is crucial. That's why we produced this handbook so everyone has the basics, as well as more comprehensive information, at their fingertips and can do their part in sharing facts, not fiction, to put us on the road to recovery rather than a path of further suffering."

Social media has fuelled a so-called 'infodemic', resulting in conspiracy theories and other misleading claims being shared rampantly, which could discourage people from being vaccinated and compromise efforts to achieve herd immunity. The COVID-19 Vaccine Communication Handbook sets out the facts, highlighting how the vaccines are overwhelmingly safe and effective.

Co-author Adam Finn, Professor of Pediatrics and Director of the

Bristol Children's Vaccine Centre at Bristol Medical School, a virologist who has played a key role in the COVID-19 [vaccine](#) developments, said: "Accurate information about vaccines is becoming harder to distinguish from convincing but misleading fiction. This reduces uptake and so their impact on [public health](#) and harms us all. Although vaccines enjoy majority support that politicians can only dream of, we can no longer take this for granted. It's time to take the initiative in ensuring people are not duped into making wrong decisions that harm them, their children and their communities."

Topics in the guide include public behaviour and attitudes, policy, facts, and misinformation.

Co-author Julie Leask, a social scientist and Professor at the University of Sydney who chairs one of the World Health Organization working groups on vaccinations, said: "The safest and most effective vaccines against COVID-19 are of no use if people cannot, or will not, take them. This handbook comes at a crucial time—when people around the world are deciding whether or not they will accept a COVID-19 vaccine. More than ever, we need to be communicating effectively and the handbook brings the science of communication to the communicators."

Advancing previous endeavours to combat bogus claims and falsehoods, this evidence-based guide compiled by more than 25 leading experts links to a wiki of further detail for each of the key topics, giving people access to more in-depth research and allowing further comments and guidance to be added in real-time.

Professor Lewandowsky said: "It's important to challenge and debunk misinformation in a positive, constructive manner. I encourage people to approach this by providing a truth sandwich—start with the key facts, including that the vaccines have been shown to be 95 percent effective and have been comprehensively tested without cutting any corners."

"Then address the misinformation. For instance, if people say the vaccine can't have been tested properly because it was developed so quickly, explain why this isn't the case. Given the severity of the pandemic, more resources and expertise than ever were dedicated to this effort. Due to its high profile, volunteers for the trials were recruited much faster than usual. The Ebola vaccine effectively took 10 months from initial testing to trials in the field, so this has been done before. Then finally reiterate the facts so they stay fresh mind."

The interdisciplinary team included experts in vaccine psychology, education, and virology who volunteered their time and expertise to produce this living document, which will continue to evolve through the wiki as the vaccine rollout gains pace.

Co-author Doug Lombardi, an educational psychologist and Associate Professor at the University of Maryland, added: "Misinformation has contributed to a false sense of balance, where pro- and anti-vaccination positions are being presented as two equal sides in an ongoing scientific debate. In reality, the scientific consensus has endorsed the effectiveness of mask wearing, social distancing, and widespread administration of COVID-19 vaccines. The COVID-19 Communications Handbook is practical guide for helping people to learn the scientific facts about COVID-19 vaccines and protect themselves against the rampant [spread of misinformation](#)."

Professor Lewandowsky said: "The COVID-19 vaccines are a stunning accomplishment of science. But our passage to freedom depends on most people getting vaccinated. This handbook and the associated wiki give frontline medical staff, journalists, policy makers, and the public at large the tools to understand why vaccines are safe and how misinformation about them can be rebutted."

More information: hackmd.io/@scibehC19vax/home

Provided by University of Bristol

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