

How to fight misconceptions about COVID-19 vaccines

March 4 2021, by Joan Tupponce



A vial of the Pfizer COVID-19 vaccine. Credit: Kevin Morley, University Relations

While approval of COVID-19 vaccines from Pfizer, Moderna and now Johnson & Johnson comes as a beacon of hope, the government's rollout

of these vaccines has been slower than expected. And many people, for a variety of reasons, are now contemplating whether they want to get vaccinated.

A recent poll from the Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research found that one in three Americans said they would not get a COVID-19 [vaccine](#). That type of hesitancy could hurt the chances of stopping the spread of the disease, which leading infectious disease scientists—including Anthony Fauci, M.D.—say can't happen without 70% to 85% of the U.S. population getting inoculated.

To better understand this hesitancy—and how to talk about it—VCU News spoke with Jeanine Guidry, Ph.D., an assistant professor in the Richard T. Robertson School of Media and Culture in the College of Humanities and Sciences and director of VCU's Media+Health Lab. Guidry's dissertation at the VCU School of Medicine examined effective message design development for a future Zika vaccine, and her research focuses on the use of social media and mobile technology in health, risk and crisis communication.

How do you talk to family members who are hesitant about getting the vaccine?

I think one of the most important things to find out is why they are hesitant. The COVID-19 vaccine is a miracle. It was developed in less than a year. So what are they concerned about?

Are they concerned about the speed of the vaccine development? Is it a concern about the safety of the vaccine? Are there some more serious pieces of misinformation they may have encountered and are not sure about?

It's important to acknowledge that being concerned is valid. We have lived in an emergency situation for the past year. There has been great uncertainty in much of our collective lives. So a few things you can do: Show empathy—"I understand you may be hesitant, but let me tell you my experience with it." If you have gotten the vaccine already, your experience is worth a lot because you can say, "I understand you are concerned, but I got the vaccine, my family got the vaccine, and this is how we get out of this pandemic."

What are the best ways to engage with family or friends on social media who are vaccine-hesitant? What should people avoid?

Don't argue. Many of the same in-person communications principles apply with online communications as well. If you are communicating with family and friends you are in touch with in real life as well as on social media, I would recommend having a private conversation in person, on the phone or through Private Messenger. You want to be able to communicate honestly. You don't want people to feel defensive, especially if someone says, "I don't believe this vaccine is going to work." Publicly posting on their feed "you are wrong," is not something that will help. I would take that conversation off the platform if you can. Communication comes across differently when you put it in writing. It's hard to take something back, and it's easy to have something misconstrued.

Again, figure out what their concerns are. Acknowledge that it's normal to feel concerned in the midst of a pandemic. It's not just about the vaccine. It's about everything we've gone through in the past year. Can our kids go back to school? What's going to happen to my business? When can we see family? When can we travel? All those kind of questions are tied into this. Then share your own experiences.

For those who won't even entertain the idea of getting a COVID-19 vaccine, what's the best way to get through to them?

That's a hard question. Find out if it is the COVID-19 vaccine they are hesitant about, or all vaccines. If it is the COVID-19 vaccine specifically, it may be a matter of clarifying some misconceptions about it. For example, the vaccine was developed incredibly quickly. That's a miracle but it doesn't mean corners were cut. Research on other coronaviruses (because there are many) was already taking place, and vaccine developers were able to build on that.

In addition, governments—the U.S. and others—were willing to invest in multiple companies and vaccine platforms at once, and this increased the odds of having a vaccine, or vaccines, available much quicker. Those strategies paid off tremendously, and that is something you can explain.

If someone has a concern that the COVID-19 vaccine changes your DNA, you can explain that several of the vaccines use mRNA, which may sound like DNA but is different. If someone is opposed to all vaccines, communication becomes much more difficult. But I would still go back to why they are concerned about vaccines. What is their main reason and can you address that?

How do you talk to friends and family who might be spreading the wrong information?

The majority of people who spread COVID-19 vaccine misinformation do it because they are concerned, scared the vaccine is going to harm them or their family, that it won't work. That's a hard thing to address because it usually has been building for a while. Bring it back to why they are concerned and have a conversation on that.

I believe social media is a tremendous tool for communicating health-related information. But it also can be a tremendous tool to spread misinformation. We live in a time of an enormous amount of available information, and that can become overwhelming. Our natural response is to react to it. We quickly filter based on our own experiences and prior beliefs. But once information is shared, especially online, there's no taking it back. So the first thing I think we can all do is take a pause before we share anything, particularly something related to COVID-19 treatment or prevention, such as the vaccine.

I like to compare it to washing your hands, something we ask people to do for at least 20 seconds to prevent COVID-19 infection. With online information sharing, take those 20-30 seconds to take a step back and process what you're doing. Does it sound too good to be true? Can I find that information elsewhere, from a reliable source such as the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention or the Virginia Department of Health? Is the listed source anonymous or tied to a specific interest group? If you're not sure, maybe it should not be shared until you can confirm it's legit through other sources.

It's important not just to have these conversations online, as much as possible also have them in person. You may not be able to convince them right away, but you may be able to reach a certain point of saying, would you be willing to think about this? That's half the battle. If someone spreads information about the vaccine that is not correct, 99 out of 100 times it comes out of concern that the vaccine is not the right thing to do. If that's the case, concern is something you can address.

What credible sources do you recommend?

That should be a simple answer, but it's not as simple as I would like it to be. As a public health researcher and health communications specialist, the CDC, World Health Organization and Virginia Department of Health

are my go-to sources. They should be go-to sources for everyone. It doesn't mean their information is perfect, but it does mean that if information changes and they have to change recommendations, they will do that as soon as they are able. I know people at all three of these organizations, and they are public health heroes. They have spent the past year trying to keep us all safe. Those are among the most reliable sources.

But if you are talking to someone who doesn't trust government health sources or public health sources, which unfortunately we see more of that now, you have to find other sources. Find out who they do trust and listen to, who they find credible. Find those sources and provide that for your friends and family.

All of our public health sources are working more and more through what we call trusted messengers, such as faith, community and entertainment leaders. You need to find a source to whom the person will listen. You need to find a source that provides the same information, and ideally gets their information from the CDC.

Provided by Virginia Commonwealth University

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