

# Scams await many Americans desperate to get COVID vaccine

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(HealthDay)—One woman chatting on the Bumble dating app recently

struck up a conversation with a seemingly nice guy that led to them swapping texts.

"He told her that he was going to get the COVID vaccine. She expressed her interest, and he told her that she should pay him for it and he could get her a place in line," said Amy Nofziger, director of victim support for the AARP Fraud Watch Network.

Instead, the woman reported the scam to fraud experts, who said they've heard about a number of similar schemes related to the COVID-19 vaccination effort in the United States.

Intense demand for COVID vaccinations in the United States, combined with confusion over how to sign up for one, have created an opportunity for con artists to scam trusting folks out of hard-earned money and [personal information](#).

"We know scammers follow the headlines, and they're just going to take advantage of whatever is timely," said Colleen Tressler, senior project manager with the U.S. Federal Trade Commission's Division of Consumer and Business Education.

Signs of potential scams include:

- Being asked to pay to get the vaccine.
- Charging a fee to gain early access to a vaccine or to add a person's name to a vaccine waiting list.
- Offers by marketers to sell or ship doses of vaccine for payment.
- Receiving ads for vaccines through social media platforms.
- Claims of U.S. Food and Drug Administration approval for a vaccine or treatment of which you've never heard.

"There's no cost to doing this," Tressler said, noting that the vaccine is free to all Americans. "You don't pay to sign up for the COVID vaccine, so anyone who contacts you and asks for a payment to put you on a list, to make an appointment for you or reserve a spot in line is a scammer."

In general, experts suggest that you be on your guard regarding any vaccine offers from unsolicited or unknown sources via e-mail, telephone calls or text messages.

"Scammers also might call people and offer things like a COVID-19 kit or a [coronavirus](#) package, which really means nothing. It's just a pitch," Tressler said.

Folks should be particularly be concerned if someone has reached out to them with an offer and ask for immediate payment, particularly if they ask for an unusual form of payment, Nofziger said.

"Criminals will usually ask for forms of payment that are untraceable and pretty much immediate," Nofziger said. These might include prepaid gift cards from Amazon or other sites, bitcoin or any cryptocurrency, peer-to-peer cash transfer apps like Venmo or PayPal, and wire transfers.

"No legitimate vaccine provider is going to ask for any sort of payment or even administrative fee with a prepaid, store-branded gift card," Nofziger said.

Another red flag is an unsolicited call probing for personal information like your Social Security number, your Medicare number or bank account info, Tressler said.

"If people get a call from someone claiming to be associated with Medicare and they ask for this information, we really encourage people

to hang up because that's not Medicare calling," Tressler said. "That's a scammer looking for that personal information to use it to commit fraud, like identity theft."

Also be worried if the person is pressing you to act immediately.

"If there seems to be a sense of urgency, just take a step back," Tressler said. Before you act, discuss what you've been told with other folks—your doctor or pharmacist, an elected official, or maybe even family or friends.

The [best defense](#) for people who are very interested in getting a COVID-19 vaccine is to be proactive, making calls themselves to [health providers](#), public health departments and other trusted sources to sign up for their shots, experts said.

That way, you aren't relying on a mysterious call or text from an unknown source to sign up for your COVID vaccine.

Even here, though, there might be some worries because legitimate providers might ask for your Social Security number or Medicare number, so they can be reimbursed for administrative costs related to the [vaccine](#), Nofziger said.

It's OK to ask the person why they need that information, and even to call a fraud hotline to make sure the request is legitimate, Tressler and Nofziger said.

"If they're making the call to a trusted source, it's good to ask that question, and if they get a responsible answer then they can move forward," Tressler said.

**More information:** Anyone who suspects they have been the victim of

a COVID-19 vaccine fraud should call or contact one or more of the following:

- The FBI at 1-800-CALL-FBI.
- The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services at 1-800-HHS-TIPS.
- The Federal Trade Commission at ReportFraud.ftc.gov.
- The AARP Fraud Watch Network at 1-877-908-3360.

The U.S. Federal Trade Commission has more about [avoiding COVID-19 scams](#).

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