

The COVID-19 Vaccine Communication Handbook: Summary for Policymakers

About the Handbook

A team of scientific experts, led by the University of Bristol, have created an online guide to help fight the spread of misinformation about the COVID-19 vaccines. Topics in the handbook include public behaviour and attitudes, policy, facts, and misinformation.

The guide aims to arm people with practical tips and provide up-to-date information and evidence to talk reliably about the vaccines, reduce fear and constructively challenge associated myths. It includes:

- Key facts and messages about vaccines and uptake
- How to engage with someone expressing vaccine uncertainty
- Evidence-informed communication approaches to address myths and reduce misinformation

The handbook links to a [‘living library’](#) of information that will be regularly updated.

You can find the full handbook [here](#).

Vaccines & Uptake key messages

Vaccines help people survive. Vaccines save 5 lives every minute. The eradication of smallpox—a serious disease that left even survivors scarred for life—alone saves an estimated 5 million lives every year. If a vaccine had not eradicated smallpox, someone would now die from the disease every 6 seconds of every day. Prior to the introduction of a vaccine, as recently as 1980, measles caused more than 2.6 million deaths globally.

Vaccines can only save lives if people are vaccinated. Fortunately, most people get vaccinated. For example, 85% of children worldwide are vaccinated against diphtheria, tetanus, and pertussis (whooping cough), and in 125 countries that figure exceeds 90%. The vast majority of people in most countries vaccinate their children, thereby making an important contribution to public health and people’s lives.

COVID-19 vaccines

COVID-19 is a serious disease. In only 10 months the SARS-CoV-2 virus infected over 78 million people across the world, killing 1.7 million. COVID-19 patients require intensive care in hospital at a rate more than 6 times greater than during the influenza pandemic in 2009. Many survivors are faced with sometimes severe long-term health impacts.

While behavioural measures such as isolating while symptomatic, mask-wearing and physical distancing have slowed the spread of the virus, vaccines provide a better path out of the COVID-19 pandemic, and scientists have now developed several highly effective vaccines against COVID-19.

Covid-19 vaccine trials

Because of the risk from COVID-19 and its prevalence, it was possible to expedite the clinical trials without compromising safety:

- Funding was no obstacle and thousands of scientists contributed to the effort.
- Many tens of thousands of people signed up rapidly to participate in COVID-19 vaccine trials in 2020, compared to the 12-18 months it often takes to recruit far fewer participants for such trials.
- These vaccines have been tested with more participants than many earlier vaccines for other diseases.
- Because of the high prevalence of COVID-19 in the population, observing the efficacy of the vaccines based on naturally-occurring infections was more rapid than it would be with other, rarer diseases.
- Pharmaceutical companies took financial risks and started investing in manufacturing early on, so there was no delay between completion of testing and rollout.

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As with all medicines, side effects can occur after getting a COVID-19 vaccine. However, these side effects are transient (24-48 hours), and serious side effects (allergic reactions) are exceedingly rare. The fact is: The risk of the disease by far outweighs the risks of the COVID-19 vaccines.

Public attitudes and vaccination

Studies in several countries have shown that most of the public recognize the importance of the COVID-19 vaccine and are keen to be vaccinated.

A survey in the UK also indicated that trust in scientists is increasing, with 64% of respondents indicating in April 2020 that the pandemic had made them more likely to listen to scientists and researchers.

People are more likely to vaccinate when:

- It is convenient, free and easy.
- They have confidence in the safety of the vaccine and trust in the system that delivers it.
- Their healthcare professionals recommend it.
- Role models, friends and family or others 'like them' have been vaccinated.
- People are reminded that their actions can foster community immunity and help others.
- People recognise the risk from the disease, and understand vaccination is an effective solution to that risk.

Factors that lead to hesitancy towards the COVID-19 vaccine:

- Ideological reasons.
- About a third of people who are not intending to be vaccinated against COVID-19 are committed vaccination opponents and often believe in conspiracy theories.
- Safety concerns.
- Many marginalized communities traditionally face obstacles and inequalities in healthcare. They may also have collective histories of experience with medical malpractice that affect current trust.
- Some people hope to become free-riders, letting others have the vaccine while they receive the benefits of herd immunity.
- Some young and healthy people believe they are not at risk from COVID-19.

The Covid-19 Vaccine Communication Handbook and Wiki were created by the SciBeh project:

<https://hackmd.io/@scibehC19vax/contributors>

Press release: <https://www.bristol.ac.uk/news/2021/january/covid-19-vaccine-communication-handbook.html>

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