

Ten Tips for addressing COVID-19 vaccine hesitancy among patients

The current roll-out of the COVID-19 vaccination programme throughout Ireland heralds the start of the long and complex journey towards controlling a pandemic that has taken an enormous toll on society and continues to cause millions of infections and deaths across the world. It is of paramount importance that the various COVID-19 vaccines are delivered to as many eligible patients as possible, safely and efficiently. Some patients, however, are reluctant to receive the vaccine, for a variety of reasons, and we would like to offer some tips to help improve vaccine uptake for your patients.

There may be many reasons for vaccine hesitancy, and these may include:

- concerns about pain and/or adverse reactions
- worries about the thoroughness of vaccine research and development
- lack of awareness or false beliefs about COVID-19
- concerns about freedom of choice
- distrust of the government, pharmaceutical companies, or healthcare officials
- concerns about vaccine effectiveness.

Our GP members are well-placed to engage with patients regarding the Covid-19 vaccine and undertake, where appropriate, meaningful discussions that effectively address concerns and misinformation.

The following tips may help frame these conversations and help improve communication with patients:

1. Consider reaching out to patients early and often in discussions about COVID-19 vaccines using credible, fact-based information. Examples might include posting facts or frequently asked questions about the vaccines on your website or social media pages with updates about vaccine information and timelines.
2. Acknowledge that conflicting information about COVID-19 vaccines from various sources has created confusion and contradictions. Let patients know what you have done to build your knowledge base about vaccines, and reassure them that you are following national recommendations and best practices — and that you will continue to monitor for new information and guidance.
3. Listen to patients without interrupting, and acknowledge their fears and concerns. Showing patients that you care about their point of view will help foster trust and may help alleviate any anxiety about COVID-19 vaccines.
4. Be aware of how nonverbal communication can affect the doctor–patient encounter. Certain facial expressions might be interpreted as judgmental (e.g. raising eyebrows, smirking, or head shaking), which may cause patients to be less willing to share concerns or listen to advice or guidance.
5. Keep in mind that patients' confusion or misperceptions about vaccine information might be related to health literacy and comprehension or language issues. Provide patients with verbal and written information in plain language that highlights the most important points they need to know.
6. Gauge the patient's understanding of information using methods such as the 'teach-back' technique.
7. Have honest conversations with patients regarding the benefits and risks of vaccination, including potential side effects and adverse outcomes. Let patients know that all vaccines carry risks, but the decision not to get vaccinated also has risks. Give patients rational guidance for weighing risks versus benefits.
8. Encourage patients to ask questions, and be prepared to answer them. Patients will undoubtedly have questions about vaccine development, safety, efficacy, side effects, immunity, and more. Understanding their concerns and providing information in a way that they can understand will help patients make informed decisions about their care.

9. Remember that vaccination is not compulsory, and while it may be in the patient's best interest, if the patient decides against receiving the vaccine offered, then their decision should be accepted and respected.
10. Conversations around the issues of vaccination should be recorded in the patient's file, including what advice and information the patient was given.

For more information about having effective vaccine conversations with patients, visit the HSE Information website <https://www2.hse.ie/covid-19-vaccine/> which includes guidance for talking with patients about vaccines, making recommendations for vaccination, and answering common patient questions. It is important to keep up to date with current advice which may change frequently.

The above was adapted from information published by MedPro. Both Medisec and MedPro share the same core values and we believe in the benefit of sharing knowledge, insights and resources to further our commitment to defend physicians, prevent claims before they happen and to improve patient safety outcomes.

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