



Understanding the “COVID Skeptics”

Note: While this section was written with COVID-19 vaccines in mind, many of the general principles apply to other vaccines as well. Individual vaccines may vary in their antigenic components or dosage forms, but the principles of human behavior and good communication skills transcend most differences between vaccines.



The Issue

When COVID-19 vaccination efforts began in the United States, it became clear that vaccine hesitancy could not be explained reliably by traditional demographic categories (e.g., political affiliation, race, age, gender, economic status). Instead, some distinct personas emerged based on shared beliefs and barriers to getting the vaccine. These personas transcend traditional demographic categories, and each persona includes at least some members of every demographic group.

According to the nonprofit organization Surgo Ventures, one of these personas is the “COVID skeptic.” Hesitancy among COVID skeptics relates to specific, deeply held beliefs around COVID-19.

What You Need to Know About COVID Skeptics

Based on polling and psychobehavioral analysis conducted by Surgo Ventures in 2021, approximately 14% of Americans are COVID skeptics.¹ They are the people least likely to get vaccinated. COVID skeptics perceive themselves to be at low risk of COVID-19 infection and are guided by misinformation. People in this group believe in at least one conspiracy theory, such as:

- > The government has exploited COVID-19 to control people.
- > COVID-19 was caused by a ring of people who secretly manipulate world events.
- > Microchips are implanted with the COVID-19 vaccine.

Previous research into vaccine hesitancy by epidemiologists and social psychologists found that vaccine skeptics were much more likely than non-skeptics to value individual freedom and liberties and to resent being told what to do by others. They also were much less willing to defer to people in positions of power.^{2,3}

What Might Work

COVID skeptics are considered to be the least persuadable vaccine persona. But that doesn't mean they are not persuadable—the percentage of COVID skeptics reported by Surgo Ventures in 2021 decreased from 17% to 14% between January and May 2021.

Because COVID skeptics tend to value liberty and individual rights, it is important to emphasize that vaccination is their own personal choice. One approach that could work is asking the person to consider why others (e.g., people who

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traffic in conspiracy theories) might want them to believe a particular thing about COVID-19 or vaccines. They might be surprised to learn that just 12 people—arguably, influencers operating from positions of power—have been responsible for the majority (as much as 65%) of COVID-19 misinformation on social media and may be profiting financially from it.⁴

Another approach when talking with COVID skeptics is to begin by simply listening with an attitude of genuine curiosity. Ask COVID skeptics about their main reason for not wanting to get vaccinated. After they have shared, try to distill their concern into a brief, nonjudgmental statement; reflect it back to them and check to see if you got it right. “So, it sounds like you think the COVID-19 virus may have been created intentionally to scare the public and take away personal freedoms. Is that right?” Then encourage the person to tell you more. According to journalist Amanda Ripley—author of *High Conflict: Why We Get Trapped and How We Get Out*—when people feel heard, “they open up; they say more nuanced, complicated things—less exaggerated and extreme things; and they’re more likely to take in information they don’t want to hear.”⁵

Remember, the people who ask questions are not necessarily against vaccination. They may be vaccine contemplators seeking additional information to help them make their decision.

If you decide to share information about COVID-19 vaccines, be sure to ask for permission first, and end by asking what the person thinks about the information you just shared.

References

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