



UPDATED: 9 February 2021

# How to talk to the public about COVID-19 vaccines

## Instructions for the use of this tool:

This tool aims to provide guidance on how to communicate effectively using online and offline channels to reach different audiences, build public knowledge and awareness, and manage expectations and uncertainties. Through communicating effectively, we can help to ensure that people have the information they need about COVID-19 vaccines and enhance confidence around the vaccines and their introduction. In rapidly evolving circumstances, we must provide the best possible information, so that we can help anticipate and manage risks – including to demand for routine immunization. Effective communication will be key to building and maintaining public trust.

This tool may be useful for national and subnational health authorities, WHO, UNICEF and other United Nations agencies, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), civil society organizations (CSOs), the media, community leaders, religious leaders and influencers.

*Please note: All guidance in this tool should be adapted for local context (nationally and by target audience). Your approach and key messages should be determined by the local vaccine introduction strategy, type of vaccine being introduced, status of introduction and other factors including levels of supply, and managing expectations.*

## Guiding principles when communicating about COVID-19 vaccines:

1. Accept and communicate uncertainty – explain what is known, what is unknown, and your plans to fill in the gap.
2. Admit when you don't know the answer to a question. If possible, find out the answer and provide the information later.
3. Share information in a timely and proactive way.
4. Be mindful and respectful of public values and concerns when communicating to enhance confidence around COVID-19 vaccine introduction.
5. Be transparent about possible risks and prepare people for possible side effects and potential unexpected circumstances (for example, adverse events following immunization).
6. Remind people that there are simple ways they can continue to protect themselves and those they care about: hand washing, mask wearing, and physical distancing.

## Practical communication advice:

- Show empathy, solidarity and understanding.
- Listen actively to questions and concerns. Respect and acknowledge diversity of opinion.
- Use clear and simple language and avoid jargon.
- Avoid over-reassuring or making promises. It is important to set realistic expectations.





## MESSAGES BEFORE AND DURING COVID-19 VACCINE INTRODUCTION

### *Top line messages / Supporting messages*

**Safe and effective vaccines are an important tool, in combination with other measures, to protect people against COVID-19 and save lives.**

In an unprecedented effort, scientists have worked hard to develop safe and effective vaccines to protect people against COVID-19.

Some countries have already started introducing one or more COVID-19 vaccines following regulatory approval, and other countries are getting ready to do so. In addition to those vaccines already being introduced, there are others still in development.

**Globally, health partners are working to provide rapid, fair and equitable access and distribution of COVID-19 vaccines to high-risk and priority populations in all countries.**

One mechanism is through the COVAX Facility – The COVID-19 Vaccine Global Access Facility. More than 190 countries and territories – most of the world – are participating in this global effort.

Some countries are also securing supplies of vaccines directly from manufacturers.

**The approval process for new vaccines will follow all the usual steps to ensure that standards of safety, efficacy and quality are met.**

While some steps in the development process have happened at the same time to ensure vaccines reach people as soon as possible, no steps are being left out to ensure safety and effectiveness. The processes are as rigorous for COVID-19 vaccines as for any other new vaccine.

COVID-19 vaccines are only available for use in a country after they have been approved by the national regulatory authority; the COVAX Global Vaccine Facility requires vaccines to have WHO Emergency Use Listing.

As the vaccines are introduced, they will continue to be monitored closely. A small number of adverse events are to be expected, which is also the case with other new and routine vaccines. Any adverse events following immunization will be closely studied and followed up.





## **It will take some time before COVID-19 vaccines become widely available.**

Even once COVID-19 vaccines have been approved by national regulators, it still takes time for them to be manufactured and distributed.

Vaccines are expected to begin arriving in most countries sometime in 2021. However, it is not yet known how long it will take to deliver them to all countries; this will depend on the speed of production and distribution.

## **Countries will need to prioritize who gets the vaccine first. Fairness and equity are key.**

National governments will need to define priority groups or populations to receive the vaccine once available, based on their country contexts.

The most important goal of COVID-19 vaccination is to prevent illness and deaths, and to reduce widescale social disruption. To achieve this, WHO has advised that initial vaccination should include health care workers, to maintain vital health service functions, as well older persons and those with other health issues, to prevent the health system from being overwhelmed, and to save lives.

Once vaccines are delivered to countries, systems will be needed to store the vaccines in appropriate conditions and deliver them to priority groups. Planning for vaccination also needs to be carefully undertaken to ensure that everyone in the priority groups will be reached.

Once vaccines become more available, countries can expand to vaccinate other priority groups and the general population.

## **Vaccines are not a 'silver bullet'**

Vaccines are an important tool in fighting COVID-19, but they will not end the pandemic. Other measures remain critical to managing the pandemic, including hand washing, mask wearing, physical distancing, and following national and local public health advice.

Based on the current evidence, we know that COVID-19 vaccines can protect individuals from the disease, but it is too early to know if they will provide long-term protection or if they prevent infection and further transmission of the virus. Therefore, we must continue using all tools and preventive practices at our disposal.





## MESSAGES FOR COUNTRIES WHERE VACCINES ARE BEING INTRODUCED

*These are suggested messages only. They should be adapted for your local context, depending on which vaccine(s) you are using, who will be receiving them first, based on your understanding of the underlying context – i.e. high demand for vaccine, issues around vaccine hesitancy, etc.*

**It is encouraging that vaccines are now being introduced in <country name>. COVID-19 vaccines are a critical new tool to protect people, especially the most vulnerable, save lives, and begin to regain some normalcy.**

Please support the prioritization of health workers, older persons, and those with chronic conditions. Support those close to you who are eligible to be vaccinated and try to be patient until it is your turn.

Even though COVID-19 vaccines are an important tool, they should not be seen as a ‘silver bullet’ to end the pandemic. It will continue to be important for everyone, including those who have been vaccinated, to continue practicing other protective behaviours.

## MESSAGES TO MANAGE EXPECTATIONS, ESPECIALLY WHERE THERE IS LIMITED SUPPLY

**As we begin introducing COVID-19 vaccines, our priority must be to protect health care workers, older persons and those with underlying health conditions.** *Include some details of what quantities of vaccine you have available, who will be receiving the vaccine, over what timeline, where they can receive them, etc.*

By first protecting those at highest risk of serious disease and those working in our health systems, we can have the biggest impact with the limited number of doses we have available. This will give us the best chance to reduce deaths and maintain health care services for everyone.

Supplying COVID-19 vaccine to every country in the world is a huge effort that will take time. We expect that additional doses will become available throughout the year, as manufacturing increases, and more people will be able to get vaccinated.

The changes we have had to make to our lives during this pandemic have been hard for everyone. We know that being vaccinated is a priority for many of you, but we ask you to be patient.





## MESSAGES TO BUILD UNDERSTANDING AROUND ADVERSE EFFECTS FOLLOWING IMMUNIZATION

**COVID-19 vaccines have gone through robust clinical trials, and are only approved for use after their safety and efficacy has been rigorously tested and the benefits are shown to outweigh the risks.**

As with any vaccine or medicine, adverse reactions are possible after receiving a vaccine. This may include common side effects such as redness and soreness at the injection site, mild fever or body aches which go away on their own after a few days.

Serious vaccine reactions are very rare, and it is important to ensure that strong surveillance systems are in place in every country to investigate any adverse event following immunization, whether or not it was caused by the vaccine. Often, these events are coincidental, caused by something else. This may be seen more often when the people receiving the vaccine are older, or have existing medical conditions. Health workers need to be trained to manage and respond to possible reactions to vaccines.

Where adverse events occur, it is important that they be thoroughly investigated. In situations like this, we often find that the vaccine was not the cause of the illness.

If you or a loved one feels severely unwell after being vaccinated, please seek medical care immediately and inform your health worker of your recent vaccination.

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***FOR MORE ADVICE, SEE 'A SHORT GUIDE TO COMMUNICATING ABOUT VACCINE-RELATED CRISES AND AEFI'S'.***

