PUBLIC HEALTH COMMUNICATIONS COLLABORATIVE

Communicating More Effectively About Vaccines

Communicating clearly about vaccines helps people make important and informed decisions about their health. However, vaccines are an increasingly contentious topic, and messages that once encouraged vaccination are proving to be less effective.

Informed by focus groups conducted by the Public Health Communications Collaborative, in partnership with PerryUndem, this resource contains messaging approaches you can consider using to help you communicate more effectively about vaccines.

Developing a New Approach to Vaccine Messaging

PerryUndem, a non-partisan research firm, held four virtual focus groups in the spring of 2024 to test messages about vaccines:

- All four groups consisted of 6–8 participants
- All four groups included a few parents of children under age 18
- Three of the four groups included individuals who may not always get seasonal flu vaccines or be fully up to date with COVID-19 vaccines
- One group included individuals who are more likely to get seasonal flu vaccines and remain up to date with COVID-19 vaccines

Vaccine Messages that Resonate

The focus groups revealed that messages about community safety, vaccine affordability, and the need to fight vaccine misinformation are not always compelling enough to inspire people to get vaccinated. On the other hand, messages about scientific rigor, the effectiveness of vaccines throughout history, and the seriousness of the illnesses vaccines protect against prompted deeper discussion and curiosity about vaccines.

Even messages that generally connect better with an audience can have weaknesses. This chart highlights the vaccine messages that connected more strongly with focus group participants and some that connected less strongly.

Messages That Connected More Strongly

- **Scientific Rigor:** Challenges concerns about the development process, vaccines being rushed, or limited data about long-term outcomes.
- **Proven Track Record:** Offers a good reminder of vaccines' historical effectiveness at reducing illness and eradicating diseases.
- **Serious Consequence of Illness:** Grabs attention and reminds people about the seriousness of diseases.

Messages That Connected Less Strongly

- **Caring for Oneself/Others:** The community benefit of vaccines is understood, but it fails to alleviate personal worries about vaccine safety and effectiveness.
- **Healthy is Better Than Sick:** This message insufficiently addresses personal assessment of vaccine safety and effectiveness.
- **Financial Cost:** Large medical bills from diseases are not a top concern when it comes to vaccines.
- **Misinformation Harms Health:** People have a lot of confidence in their own research and experiences and think their information and sources are reliable.

How to Open the Conversation About Vaccines

Use the below recommendations to craft vaccine messages that spark curiosity and openness in your audience. Keep in mind: These are approaches, not scripts. To tailor communications to your specific audience, review our Strategies for Developing Culturally Driven Public Health Communications and Plain Language for Public Health resources.

Lead with the scientific rigor of vaccine development.

The research highlighted that a focus on rigorous testing is one of the most persuasive ways to discuss vaccine safety and effectiveness.

EXAMPLE MESSAGE

Each vaccine goes through an extensive, standardized testing process before a healthcare professional can use it.

When a vaccine is developed in response to an emergency, it still must undergo rigorous testing to ensure safety and efficacy.

Some vaccines leverage previous vaccine research, increased public interest in clinical trials, and overlapping research and development phases to reach the general public on a quicker timeline without compromising safety.

WHY IT WORKS

- Addresses concerns about vaccines being rushed and untrustworthy.
- Highlights the process vaccines go through to ensure their safety and efficacy without using complex terms.
- Uses the words “rigorous” and “safety” even when vaccines are created on a quicker timeline.

Remind people about the seriousness of the illnesses vaccines can protect against.

The focus groups indicated that people may not know, understand, or recall the serious potential effects that vaccines protect against.

EXAMPLE MESSAGE

Vaccines help prevent illnesses that have serious potential effects, such as cancer, pneumonia, blindness, deafness, or even death.

Vaccines can prevent or minimize the worst effects of illnesses and reduce the spread to those at the highest risk.

WHY IT WORKS

- Contains new information without making assumptions about peoples’ experiences.
- Reinforces protective and lifesaving elements of vaccines.
- Explains that vaccine success includes minimizing illness severity and not just illness prevention.

Explain the long track record of vaccine effectiveness.

The historical effectiveness of vaccines (e.g., chickenpox and MMR vaccines) illustrated to focus group participants that vaccines can prevent or eradicate disease.

EXAMPLE MESSAGE

Vaccines have a proven track record of reducing disease. Many people you know are vaccinated against diseases that once were very common and caused serious illness and even death. For example, the polio vaccine, developed in the 1950s, has brought down cases of poliovirus worldwide by more than 99%.

Today we can vaccinate people against a number of still-circulating diseases.

All vaccines play an important role in saving lives, reducing disease, and creating a healthy community.

WHY IT WORKS

- Recognizes the positive feelings about vaccines with a long history. Focus group participants trusted traditional vaccines, like polio and chickenpox, more than newer vaccines like HPV.
- Connects the message about more recently developed vaccines to a larger story about the history and effectiveness of vaccines.
- Reminds people that vaccines have and continue to save lives.

Be intentional about grouping vaccines in communications.

Focus group participants had different knowledge, attitudes, and beliefs about each vaccine discussed. Vaccines that are more politicized or susceptible to misinformation, like COVID-19, can increase confusion and hesitancy around all vaccines, particularly more recently released ones like RSV.

EXAMPLE MESSAGE*

Vaccine development prioritizes safety and efficacy. Every vaccine development process is transparent and rigorous, with continual oversight and expert approval.

While the first flu vaccine was developed nearly 100 years ago, it is updated each season to prevent the flu strains that are most likely to be in circulation.

Healthcare professionals stay current on the most up-to-date vaccines to help you make the best decisions about your health.

**Though this example focuses on the flu vaccine, you can apply this framing to any vaccine messaging.*

WHY IT WORKS

- Avoids comparing a vaccine with one that may be less trusted, which can decrease trust in both vaccines.
- Provides information about a single vaccine, which is easier to understand and digest than information about several vaccines.
- Focuses on the history, development, and efficacy of one vaccine to encourage more conversations about other vaccines or general health.

Personalize your message to specific communities and individuals.

Each focus group participant had unique concerns and perceptions about vaccines.

EXAMPLE MESSAGE

You are the ultimate decision-maker about your vaccine plan.

Experiences with these illnesses can be more serious than you might expect and symptoms and outcomes vary for everyone.

You can review many trusted resources to find more information that can help you feel more confident in your decision about vaccines.

WHY IT WORKS

- Honors people's experiences, which to many people, are more reliable than expert opinion.
- Encourages people to further explore their specific questions so they can make the best decisions for their health.
- Validates people's autonomy and concerns and helps build trust.

Ask Yourself

Before sharing information about vaccines with your community members, ask yourself these questions.

Does my message...

- ☐ explain the rigorous scientific development and testing of the vaccine?
- ☐ speak directly about the safety and effectiveness of the vaccine?
- ☐ address concerns about a newer vaccine being rushed or untested?
- ☐ connect with my audience on a personal level?

PUBLIC HEALTH COMMUNICATIONS COLLABORATIVE

Access the most up-to-date vaccine messaging recommendations, research, and resources on publichealthcollaborative.org.