

# Having Difficult Conversations With Loved Ones About the COVID-19 Vaccine

The focus of the world is now on COVID-19 vaccines. With every aspect of their development and rollout featured in the news, the challenge we may all encounter now is the discussion with others about whether accepting the vaccine or not is the right choice. This article series will help you politely and assertively navigate some of those difficult conversations.

## Vaccine hesitancy

Many people will be eager to get the vaccine, but others will be hesitant. And some may be strongly opposed to the treatment. People's hesitancy toward vaccination may be caused by a variety of factors. For example:

**Pre-existing health conditions.** Some people may be concerned about how the vaccine will affect them if they have a pre-existing health condition, or how it may react to their medication regimen. A GP should be able to offer guidance on these issues. Some health conditions preclude vaccinations because the immune system itself is compromised. This is one of the reasons why "herd immunity" is important; it protects those who cannot be vaccinated.

**Rumours.** In the past, some people have been reluctant to come forward for vaccination on themselves or their children because they may have heard troubling stories about side-effects that have worried them. There is no link between vaccinations and autism; the vaccines do not contain live viruses or trackable substances. Vaccine misinformation is addressed by Health Canada [here](#).

**Pregnant and breastfeeding.** Expectant mothers and those breastfeeding may have been understandably cautious at first, but staying up to date on the research quoted on [Health Canada](#) can help those in this group to make their decision.

**COVID-19 won't affect me.** Many young people may not realise that although they may generally have a milder COVID-19 infection, some cases of the disease can cause serious harm and worse. They also may not realize that they can suffer from [Long Covid](#) which would have a negative effect on their lives for some considerable time.

**Personal views.** Some may be openly opposed to vaccination based on their political views or mistrust of the pharmaceutical industry. Others have concerns about becoming ill as a result of a vaccination.

## Speaking to family and friends

Be prepared for the fact that some people you think you know well will have the opposite view to yours on the issue of the vaccine. Here are some ways to have a difficult conversation when you disagree with loved ones and friends without putting them on the defensive.

**Explain your personal views.** You may want to help them understand how you have formed your opinion about the vaccine. Let's say, you have been vaccinated; the other person who disagrees may find it helpful to understand why you thought it important. For example, you may be concerned for an older relative that you care for. You could explain, "I'm being cautious to keep them safe."

**If you are the person against vaccination, try to listen to people with different views.** Exercise compassion. The pandemic has been a difficult, stressful time for many people. Part of that stress has

been due to the uncertainties and unknowns as the pandemic developed. Researchers, medical providers, and public health officials are continually learning about COVID-19 and its variants. Be open to the possibility of new information and changes in recommendations as a result. Check reliable sources such as [Health Canada](#).

**Ask the other person to share their thoughts.** Remember to be polite and respectful. Not everyone shares your situation or your concerns. Some may have experienced the effects of COVID-19 infection, while others may have been lucky enough to have avoided coming into contact with it.

**Choose your battles.** Focus on the issues that matter most and try to let the others go. If you don't, you may end up arguing continually about things that aren't really important. Ask yourself, "What's really important here?"

**Consider having family meetings to resolve some conflicts.** Disagreements with family members can heat up much faster than with others because they involve stronger emotional ties. Call a "time out" if a disagreement gets out of control.

**Think about the disagreement from the other person's point of view.** Could the way you are talking be making the other person react in a certain way? Is there a way to reach a compromise?

**If you don't agree, don't take it personally.** You have different attitudes and personal situations. Try to assume that the other person has a good or at least well-meaning intention. The other person is not intending to put you or someone close to you at increased risk of COVID-19. A rejection of your argument is not a rejection of you as a person.

**Compartmentalize.** Focus on the qualities that you admire in your loved one or friend. Try to set aside your differences and don't dwell on them.

If you sense that conflict is becoming a problem, deal with it as soon as you can. It's always important to be willing to take the first step toward resolving differences with someone. Remember to be patient and try to forgive.

## Coworkers and roommates

Disagreements among roommates and coworkers about the vaccine can be especially difficult. If you have been vaccinated but your roommates and coworkers are refusing to take it up, this is particularly relevant to you because you are sharing your work or living space. Consider the following:

**Establish house rules.** It can be helpful to talk together about what your feelings are about the vaccine. Try to come to an agreement so that you are operating under the same rules.

**Understand that everyone will have different views.** Try to consider why your coworkers or roommates might have different opinions from you. While you may continue to disagree, out of a concern for safety, you may need to develop a plan, such as physical distancing if not everyone has received the vaccine.

**Be prepared for how you'll respond should sensitive issues or topics come up.** Think about what helped keep your emotions in check in other situations. You could take a few deep breaths before speaking, try changing the subject, or refrain from engaging in an argumentative discussion. It may be best to leave the room if the conversation is becoming heated.

## If you still disagree

If your view of the vaccine is so different from a person you encounter and you sense you will never come to an agreement, try the following:

**Make an effort to understand the cause of the conflict.** Ask yourself what the problem is really about. Is there a deeper issue than the one you've been arguing about that needs to be addressed?

**Stay calm.** If you are feeling angry, hurt, or fearful, it will help if you take three deep breaths or count to ten or walk away for a few minutes before you speak out of anger.

**Stick to the subject.** Don't get sidetracked by issues that aren't related to the conflict you're trying to resolve.

**Listen to the other person.** Let the other person tell their side of the story without interrupting them. Then reflect back what you heard to check your understanding. For example, you could say, "It sounds as if you are saying . . . Do I have that right?" Accept that there may be facts you don't know or that the other person interprets differently than you.

**Speak from your own experience.** It will help if you use "I" rather than "you" statements. Saying that "you" did or said something will make the other person feel blamed and on the defensive. Instead, describe your feelings by saying, "I think" or "I feel," and keep the focus on how you experienced the situation.

**Give the other person the benefit of the doubt.** Keep in mind that they may be going through something that no one knows about. Don't assume that the person was deliberately trying to aggravate or dismiss you.

Tensions over vaccines can create uncomfortable situations. It will be particularly difficult if you can't agree with someone who is really important to you. Remember if you come up against someone with a fixed belief that opposes your own, that they probably care as much as you do about everybody's physical wellbeing. You may have to leave the matter unresolved and try to focus on a time in the future when we may not have to worry about pandemics and vaccines and we can all be happy together again.

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Last Reviewed Feb 2021

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