

COVID-19 Vaccine Conversation Guide:

Resources for Talking to Friends and Family about the COVID-19 Vaccine





COVID-19 has caused major disruption to many aspects of our lives. Things once taken for granted, like going in to school and work, and socializing or traveling, were shaken up over the last few years. The healthcare system was challenged in ways it had never been and the ripple effects of the pandemic impacted our economy severely.

Arguably one of the most difficult aspects of this time has been the strain put on family and friends who may find themselves misaligned on many aspects of the pandemic, particularly whether one should take the COVID-19 vaccine.

Family gatherings might now be difficult for you, with beliefs around the pandemic creating tension, or even outright arguments. Friends that formerly had a close bond with you might now have drifted away. You might be scrolling on social media and be saddened by the divides you see widening between Canadians. All the while, you are likely worried for the well-being of your family and friends who have not been vaccinated.



While some may act as if the pandemic is over, there is still **risk** and still great

BENEFIT

to getting vaccinated.

If you are someone who has taken the COVID-19 vaccine but have family or friends who have not and you hope to encourage them to do so, this resource guide is for you. We've curated insights into how best to prepare for and navigate difficult conversations with those you love when your beliefs about the pandemic and vaccination diverge.

The goal is to help you better approach these topics from an informed and evidence-backed perspective, and hopefully, inspire those you care about to take the best action they can to quell the pandemic and stay healthy- get vaccinated.

UNDERSTANDING AND PREPARING

To best navigate these conversations, there are important things to consider before you wade in. Knowing the reasons why your family and friends have not gotten the vaccine, understanding the sorts of content online that might shape their views, and trying to understand their state of mind can all help when you connect and discuss the COVID-19 vaccine.





Why Are Your Family and Friends Unwilling to take the Vaccine?

An important first step toward encouraging vaccine confidence is understanding why your friends and family don't want to get the COVID-19 vaccine. Of course, different people have different reasons, so listening and having open discussions is critical. However, there is also research which can provide you with a valuable perspective on the most common issues.

One reason that someone might choose not to get a COVID-19 vaccine is fear over the safety of the shot. Some, including those from communities who have reason to distrust government based on past historical injustices, might have vaccine risk concerns. Thankfully, since the vaccine has been distributed for quite some time, it is increasingly clear that COVID-19 vaccines used in Canada are indeed safe.¹

Despite information on the effectiveness and safety of the COVID-19 vaccine being readily available, such information is often not enough as there are other, more deeply held beliefs that might be leading to resistance.

A large survey of Canadians early in the pandemic that aimed to understand the factors predicting willingness to take the COVID-19 vaccine showed that while vaccine risk concerns do play a part, they were not the sole barrier, or even, most important.² More consequential was how people think and what they believe.

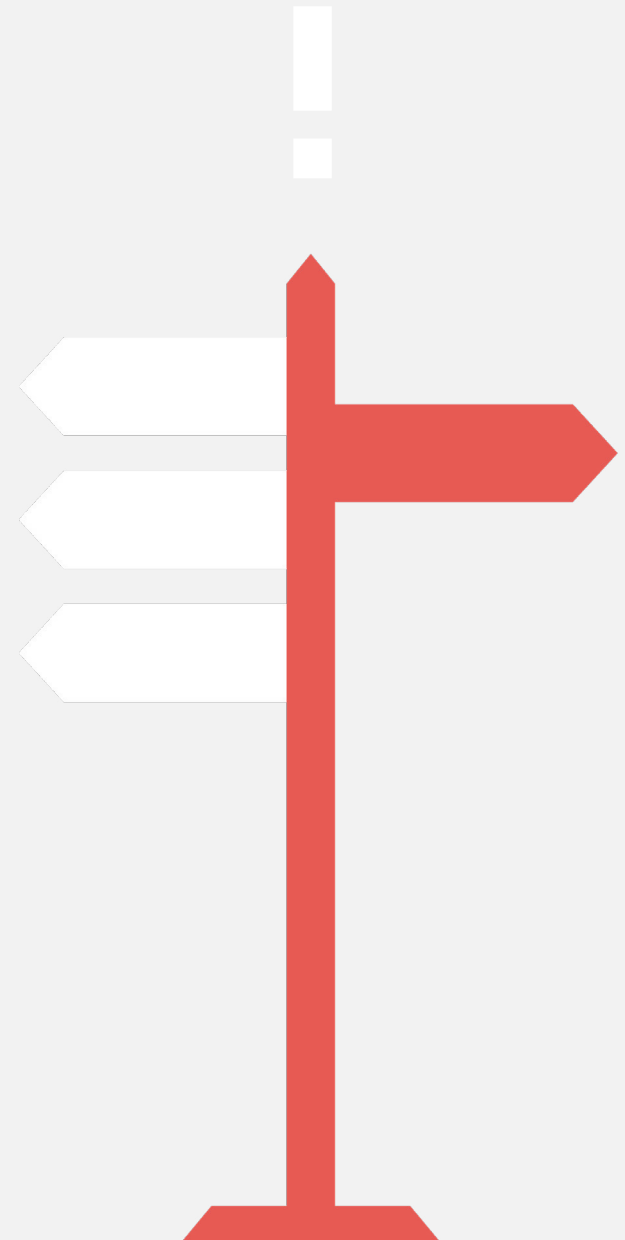


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A strong predictor that people would be on the fence or opposed to the vaccine was belief in COVID-19 conspiracy theories. The prevalence of such conspiracy beliefs and the very strong correlation between conspiracy belief and unwillingness to get the vaccine (that is, the stronger one's belief in conspiracy theories the less likely they are to get vaccinated) means that you are likely to confront such beliefs if you talk to friends and family about getting vaccinated. Thus, to navigate such conversations you will need to understand the nature of such beliefs, the misinformation ecosystem where such beliefs are often formed and strengthened and the best tactics for helping people get closer to the truth.





COVID-19 Misinformation and Conspiracies

To understand the beliefs that your friends and family hold about COVID-19, it is worthwhile to understand the misinformation and conspiracy beliefs about the pandemic that are circulated on social media. The World Health Organization has argued this misinformation to be so consequential that we must also battle an 'infodemic'³. There have long been anti-vaccine misinformation movements, even long before this pandemic. Some of the resistance we see to the COVID-19 stems from these older movements, as many of the false critiques of vaccines more broadly can be applied specifically to sow doubt about this specific vaccine. However, COVID-19 is arguably unique in that a huge array of misinformation and conspiracy theories not just about the vaccine itself but about the scope, nature, cause, and severity of COVID-19.⁴

Examples of **False** COVID-19 Conspiracies



Myth 1: COVID-19 was created in a lab in China



Myth 2: The pandemic is related to 5G technology



Myth 3: Bill Gates and the deep state are using the virus to control and track the world's population



Myth 4: The virus is a bioweapon



Myth 5: Big Pharma is behind the pandemic for profit



Myth 6: The whole thing is a hoax and COVID-19 doesn't exist



The Information Ecosystem

Where does all this misinformation come from? In Canada, research has shown that much of the misinformation we encounter here actually comes from the United States.⁵ The work shows that the majority of the COVID-19 related misinformation shared by Canadians on Twitter (including conspiracy theories, information claiming the virus to be trivial, and unfounded medical advice) was retweeted from accounts in the U.S. Further, greater U.S. media outlet exposure for Canadians heightens the extent to which they have COVID-19 misperceptions and the more a Canadian sees U.S. based posts on Twitter, the more likely they are to post misinformation.

Armed with an understanding of the sorts of misinformation that might be influencing your family and friends decision to vaccinate, the question then becomes, 'how can I help them access better information and align their beliefs more closely to the best evidence?' To do so, it is important to understand not just where they get their info, but their mindset.

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The Mindset of Conspiracy Believers

There is, of course, a lot of variation across different people, but research has shown a few factors that are related to belief in conspiracies generally, and COVID-19 related conspiracies specifically. Understanding the mindset of those you know that hold such beliefs can be crucial in managing conversations effectively.

For one, we know that mistrust of the medical industry, government, and other public health systems is typical in those hesitant to vaccinate, sometimes because of historical marginalization by health care institutions.⁶ Compounding this mistrust is lower scientific knowledge and a bias toward valuing one's personal beliefs and intuition more than scientific and empirical evidence.² For example, vaccine hesitant Canadians are more likely to agree with statements like "Just because evidence conflicts with my current beliefs, does not mean my beliefs are wrong" or "Regardless of the topic, what you believe to be true is more important than evidence against your

beliefs". Together, such findings suggest that simply connecting your friends or family to a scientific paper outlining the safety of the vaccine or a government site that summarizes the benefits of vaccination are unlikely to move the needle.



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The Conspiracy Theory Handbook effectively summarizes the seven traits of conspiratorial thinking, which capture some of these challenges.

1. Contradictory	Many of the beliefs within one's mind are inconsistent, but the commitment to the broader account is so strong, this inconsistency is accepted
2. Overriding suspicion	Such beliefs are typically accompanied by extreme skepticism and suspicion of official views
3. Nefarious intent	Nearly all conspiracy theories are rooted in the idea that the people behind the scheme are evil and have ill intent for others
4. Something must be wrong	Even if any specific of a theory are abandoned, there is a persistent sense that something is rooted in deception, somehow
5. Persecuted victim	Conspiratorial thinkers consider themselves simultaneously a victim and a hero, subject to persecution from organized forces while also brave freedom fighters and freethinkers
6. Immune to evidence	The more evidence there is against a theory, the more one might double down, as such evidence could be created by the perpetrators
7. Re-interpreting randomness	Patterns are found everywhere and nothing is an accident, instead evidence of collusion

Another important research finding to consider is that belief in conspiracy theories has been found to be associated with stressful life events and greater perceived stress⁷, as well as depression⁸. A related finding is that the less someone feels in control of their life and environment, the more receptive they are to conspiracies.⁹ National survey data shows that Canadians are experiencing more anxiety, depression, and loneliness, as the pandemic wears on, meaning that some might be increasingly susceptible to such beliefs.¹⁰ So, although not certain, it is quite possible that your friends and family who won't get vaccinated and endorse conspiracies are stressed out, depressed, or feel that things in their life and in the world are out of their control.

Knowing this before you engage can help you lead with empathy and do your best to understand the challenges they may be facing, which can be very helpful toward bridging divides.

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CONNECTING AND TALKING

Armed with an understanding of the reasons why people don't want the vaccine, the sorts of information they likely consume online, and where their mindset is at more broadly is important, but not enough to bridge divides. You also need evidence-backed techniques to help.





Getting the Right Information: Thinking about Accuracy and Verifying Facts

Research shows that when navigating social media, people are not thinking enough about whether the content they share is true or not. People might be more attuned to emotional factors, or whether the headline is aligned to their political beliefs. What this means is that people are often able to tell falsehoods from truth when asked directly to assess accuracy, but given their inattention to accuracy, they still propagate it online.

As such, even a simple nudge¹¹ to assess whether something is true can reduce the likelihood someone shares misinformation about COVID-19 online. MediaSmarts, Canada's Centre for Digital and Media Literacy has useful resources, including their [Check First. Share After.](#) campaign which helps guide you how to verify, their [Break the Fake](#) site can provide you with resources to use in your community, and a guide for how to respond when you see something you know is fake online.¹²

Many of these tactics are especially useful for communicating with friends and family on social media, but can also be applied when discussing in person. The nature of technology today can allow you to verify and fact check claims in real time, simply by pulling out your phone.

Doing this on your own is easier than in a social setting with someone with different beliefs though, and outlined below are a number of tactics that go into more detail on how to navigate these conversations.



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Preventing Misbelieving: Prebunking

A growing body of research has identified [‘prebunking’](#) as an important way to prevent misinformation from sticking in the first place. The idea is that people can be inoculated against certain types of misinformation by giving them advance warning that they may be misinformed and then shown different ways in which they might be misled. This allows you to ward off certain dubious ideas before they are believed by your friends and family.

For those looking for an in-depth look at all of the techniques to do so, the article ‘Countering Misinformation and Fake News Through Inoculation and Prebunking’¹³

There are three main types of prebunks, which can be fact-based, logic-based or source-based. Fact-based prebunks correct false claims or narratives that people may encounter, logic-based prebunks outlines tactics used to deceive, and source-based prebunks focus on identifying which sources are not to be trusted.



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Three main types of prebunks



Fact-based

Correct false claims or narratives



Logic-based

Outlines tactics used to deceive



Source-based

Focus on identifying which sources are not to be trusted

To effectively prebunk, you will need a strong base of both the facts around COVID-19 vaccinations and some of the common myths, misinformation, and disinformation that might be out there.

For a tangible example, in a section above, we shared that much of the misinformation online comes from the U.S. More specifically, analysis has shown that a majority—some two-thirds—of the misinformation about vaccines shared on Facebook or Twitter from February 1 to March 16, 2021, can be traced back to only twelve individuals or groups. In their report, The Center for Countering Digital Hate dubs these super-spreaders of misinformation ‘The Disinformation Dozen’.¹⁴ Disinformation is a more specific kind of misinformation—one intentionally shared to mislead. Given this, chances are good that your Canadian family and friends have been getting some of their information about the COVID-19 vaccine from these few, largely American, influencers, who have their own motivations to mislead (often to make money).

By orienting your friends and family to the incentives in place for these bad actors, whereby they capitalize on provocative misinformation, you can help inoculate them from falling for “facts” shared by such accounts, while simultaneously offering real facts on content such accounts share.





Correcting Misbeliefs: Debunking

As promising as it can be to prebunk, the fact is that often we are too late. Family and friends might not just have been exposed to misinformation and conspiracy theories about the COVID-19 vaccines, they might strongly believe them. In such cases, one has to try to debunk—to correct already held misconceptions. While some have raised the worry that such corrections are ineffective or even cause backfire effects (i.e., that attempts to correct will strengthen the false beliefs), subsequent research shows this to be relatively rare, and researchers tend to agree that [debunking is important and effective, if done right](#).

The article 'Does Debunking Work? Correcting COVID-19 Misinformation on Social Media'¹⁵ by Timothy Caulfield offers useful advice for countering misinformation online, and has insights applicable to face-to-face conversations. This work emphasizes the use of facts, rather than opinions, as science-informed facts can help fill in gaps left when an old belief is unseated. It is also

important to rely on jargon-free information from trustworthy and independent sources, especially those that emphasize the scientific consensus. It is important to try and weave a narrative to make things easier to follow.



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Another valuable resource is the free to download Debunking Handbook,¹⁶ a curated guide developed through collaboration between many of the world's top experts. The critical aspects for a good debunk include sharing the real facts, mentioning the myth as minimally as possible before explaining why it misleads, and reinforcing the right information.

This work is also complemented by the more specific handbook: The COVID-19 Vaccine Communication Handbook.¹⁷ This resource is hugely valuable for providing insight into many of the common myths around vaccines generally and COVID-19 specifically and offers both the real facts of the matter and outlines the fallacy at play in the myth. Using these materials in conjunction can help you in terms of having the right information needed to prebunk and debunk, and the right process for doing so.





Entrenched Misbeliefs: Empathy and Deep Listening

Encouraging fact-checking and a focus on accuracy, prebunking, and debunking are effective tools in countering the sorts of misinformation that can lead our friends and family to not get vaccinated against COVID-19. However, it is important to note that in the case of very deeply held belief, they are likely not enough, particularly if an individual has progressed to incorporating those beliefs as part of their identity. Even before the pandemic, The World Health Organization has warned that the probability of changing the mind of a very vocal science denier is very low. Such a situation means that much of the public health messaging made at scale largely ignores such deeply held beliefs. But what about when these are your parents, siblings, childhood friends, neighbours, or others you deeply care about?

The Conspiracy Theory Handbook offers some useful insights on how to try to break through with conspiracy theorists. Much of the advice in this area comes from research on

political extremism and efforts to deradicalize. Trusted messengers can be key- finding people who used to share the same beliefs of those holding a conspiracy theory that have since abandoned those beliefs can be more effective in convincing someone to follow more valid evidence. Empathy is critical as is avoiding ridicule or mockery.

If you make your friend and family member feel like they are an outsider, they may be more attracted to the community that shares their beliefs. It is also worthwhile to focus on being critical of evidence, as many conspiracy theorists self-identify as critical thinkers, and you can try to direct that orientation toward debunking dubious sources, for instance.

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While it can seem hopeless, some experts do think that 'talking to science deniers and sceptics is not hopeless'. Given how difficult it is, it is worth being patient in your conversations. Based on his experience with flat-earthers, Lee McIntyre argues for the building of trust with "patience, respect, empathy and interpersonal connections", and found that listening deeply first, opened the door to them listening to him.

A final thing to appreciate is that you might not ever convince your family and friends to get the COVID-19 vaccine. It is important to have reasonable expectations and not let yourself feel too disappointed if you cannot defeat such beliefs and persuade those you

love to vaccinate. It is a fact that you likely know someone who is unflinching in their belief. It may be sufficiently frustrating that you wish not to contact these individuals, regardless how strong the relationship once was, and that is OK. But it is worth remembering that if such individuals lose their family and friends, they will find social connection somewhere, often in online communities focused on misinformation. You must choose the path that is right for you.

Hopefully, your efforts might strengthen your relationships and help your family and friends choose to help society and themselves by getting the COVID-19 vaccine.



OTHER RESOURCES

Navigating these conversations is not easy, so it is helpful to have as much help as you can. Here is a list of further resources to learn more.



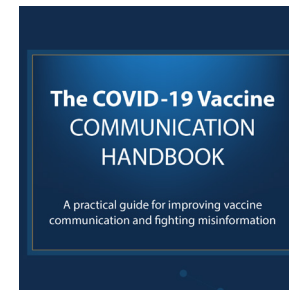
[MediaSmarts](#)



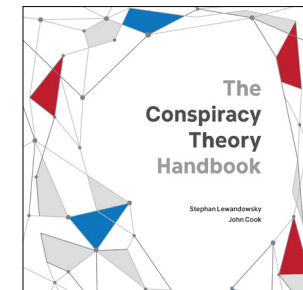
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