

HOW DO I TALK ABOUT VACCINES?

We asked a public health expert about the best approach.



Dr. Noel Brewer

Gillings Distinguished Professor in Public Health

**STEP 1:
ASK YOURSELF IF YOU'RE READY TO LISTEN.**

The more your views on vaccination differ, the more you'll need to listen and **find a point of agreement**. If you're already worked up, you're not in a good frame of mind to have a conversation.

**STEP 2:
TRY TO FIND THE MAIN CONCERN.**

People may have many concerns but are often motivated by a main concern. Until you get that on the table, the conversation can't progress. Regardless of what someone first says, you might ask, **"What is your biggest concern?"**

**STEP 3:
LISTEN AND FIND A POINT ON WHICH YOU CAN BOTH AGREE.**

People will only listen to your ideas about vaccination once they have spoken and feel heard. You might say, **"I get it. You're really worried about the potential side effects. It's reasonable — no one wants unsafe medicine."**

**STEP 4:
HAVE BRIEF DISCUSSIONS.**

Keep discussions **between 5-10 minutes**, especially the first few. Expect to spend several weeks or months gently coming back to the topic. Once a person has learned that they can talk about their opinions without judgment, you can really start to have a conversation.

**STEP 5:
KNOW WHEN TO TAKE A BREAK ...
AND COME BACK A FEW DAYS LATER.**

This is the hardest part. **Don't try to rebut their concern immediately**. Just listen, end the conversation for now and come back another time. Doing it slowly gives you time to listen, show respect and do your research in between discussions. At any point, if you feel pressure to get your point across, that's a clear cue to slow down and step away. Then come back in a few days or a week.

WHAT NOT TO DO ...

-  **Don't do it online or in text.** It's always more effective to have difficult conversations about vaccination in person or over the phone, where you can more easily add warmth.
-  **Don't make it a thing.** If the first exchange is unpleasant, both parties may avoid conversations about that topic in the future.
-  **Don't moralize.** Beliefs about vaccination can be deeply held. Moralizing them deepens polarization.
-  **Don't belittle or insult.** Though you may not intend to be hurtful, saying something that belittles a person's knowledge can be harmful to both the conversation and the relationship.
-  **Don't give medical advice.** Leave medical advice to the person's personal health care provider.

ADDITIONAL HELPFUL TIPS:

- Some may not have the ability or the time to get a vaccine, which underscores the importance of accessibility.
- If you don't have a lot of time to talk to a person, consider whether you should engage at all. Effective discussion will take time.
- Most people who are hesitant to be vaccinated are not "anti-vax" or vaccine deniers. If you do encounter a person who is intentionally spreading harmful misinformation, the World Health Organization Europe has identified effective ways to respond to vocal vaccine deniers in public (bit.ly/3MvXR1a). In these cases, your audience is other listeners and never the vaccine denier.