

Doctor communication key to pandemic vaccine adoption

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People who talk with their doctors are more likely to get vaccinated during a pandemic, according to a study of evidence collected during the "swine flu," the last pandemic to hit the U.S. before COVID-19.

Researchers from Washington State University and University of Wisconsin-Madison surveyed patients about the vaccine for the H1N1 virus, also known as the [swine flu](#), which was declared a pandemic by the World Health Organization in 2009. They found that doctor-patient communication helped build trust in physicians, which led to more [positive attitudes](#) toward the H1N1 vaccine—and it was more than just talk; it correlated to people actually getting vaccinated.

The study, recently published in the journal *Health Communication*, builds on previous research showing doctors can curb negative attitudes toward vaccinations in general, but this study specifically focuses on that role during a pandemic.

"A vaccine during a pandemic is definitely different from others, like the [flu vaccine](#), which people

already know about," said Porismita Borah, an associate professor in WSU's Murrow College of Communication and lead author on the study. "During a pandemic, it is a new vaccine for everybody. People may have more hesitancy and may be more worried about side effects. The doctor's office is one of the best sources of information for patients who have questions."

The researchers analyzed survey responses from more than 19,000 people nationwide on their attitudes toward doctors and their willingness to discuss vaccines with their physician as well as their willingness to get vaccinations—and ultimately whether or not they got the H1N1 vaccine. They found that the willingness to talk to doctors about the issue correlated with increased trust and receiving the vaccination.

The authors note that doctors often feel that they cannot ethically tell patients to take a certain vaccine. Instead they recommend physicians simply act as a resource, helping [answer questions](#) so patients can make better informed decisions. They do not, however, need to wait until patients come to them.

"Doctors could voluntarily reach out to patients, even by email, to let them know what the COVID-19 vaccine means," said Borah. "They can answer questions like how was the vaccine made? What should patients expect? Why are there two doses? I think there might be many questions people have which can be easily answered by primary care physicians who are usually well trusted by the general public."

Doctor communication with patients is particularly pressing now, Borah added, given that that one in five Americans showed an unwillingness to get the COVID-19 [vaccine](#) and the amount of misinformation around the [pandemic](#).

"People have to be really careful about what they're

seeing and what they're reading because there is so much misinformation circulating on social media," said Borah. "Sometimes this misinformation is circulated by friends and family members without any sort of bad intention—they just share it, so it's extremely important to get information from trusted sources."

More information: Porismita Borah et al, Trust in Doctors, Positive Attitudes, and Vaccination Behavior: The Role of Doctor–Patient Communication in H1N1 Vaccination, *Health Communication* (2021). [DOI: 10.1080/10410236.2021.1895426](https://doi.org/10.1080/10410236.2021.1895426)

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