Vaccine Hesitancy Toolkit

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WHY YOU MAKE A DIFFERENCE

JUST A FEW DECADES AGO, most families didn't think twice about vaccines. Today, things have changed. If someone you care about is feeling unsure about vaccines, it's natural to feel emotional or unsure how to talk about it. These conversations aren't always easy—but they matter.

And you don't have to do it alone.

By simply being open to a conversation, you can make a big impact. Globally, vaccines have helped save an estimated 150 million lives in the past 50 years. That's a huge number—but even helping one person make an informed choice is meaningful.

The truth is, the number of people who are against vaccines is actually very small. But they often speak more loudly than those who support vaccination. So when someone has honest, thoughtful questions, they may hear more from vaccine skeptics than from those who understand and support vaccines. That's where you come in.

This toolkit is here to help you talk with people who have questions—so the conversation feels less stressful, more respectful, and truly helpful.

- We all want to do what's best for the children we love.
- It's okay to have questions.

If you hold on to those two truths, you're already on the right path. We hope you'll keep reading, because we've gathered ideas and strategies that can make these conversations easier—and even more effective.

THANK YOU FOR SHOWING UP.

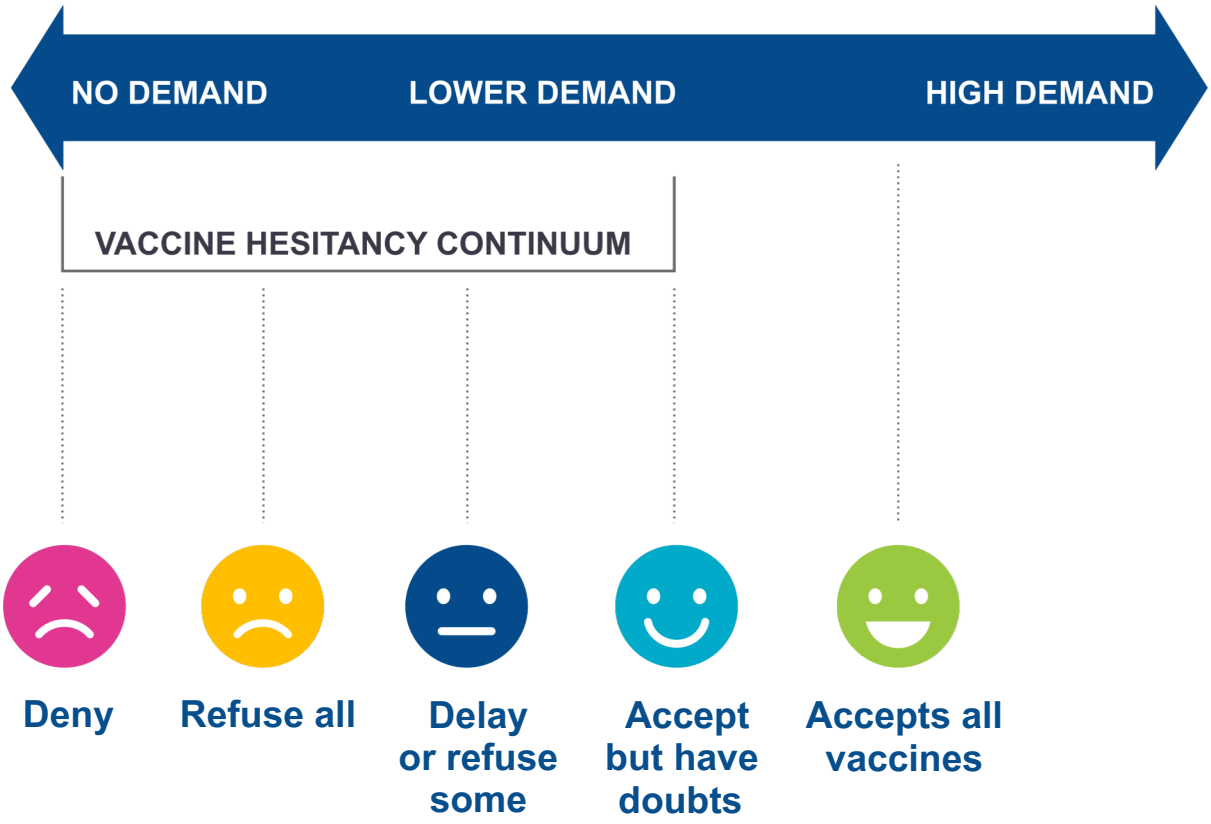
Your voice matters, and you may help someone feel more confident and informed about their health choices. That's a powerful thing.

UNDERSTANDING VACCINE HESITANCY

LET'S BEGIN with something we all share: ***we want to protect the people we love***. That's the common ground we return to again and again. Vaccine hesitancy doesn't begin with certainty—it begins with a question. And how we go about seeking answers shapes the beliefs we hold.

VACCINE HESITANCY CONTINUUM

VACCINE HESITANCY is not all-or-nothing. Most people who feel hesitant are not completely opposed—they're often in a space of uncertainty. They may have accepted some vaccines and delayed others. What they're really doing is searching for answers. By understanding where someone is on this continuum, you can offer the support and information that's most useful for them.

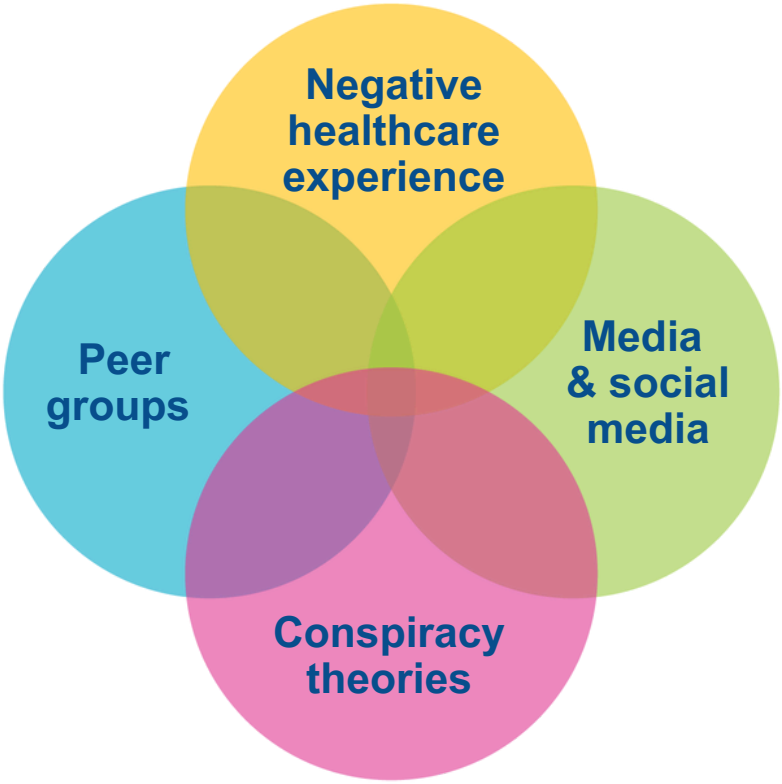


COMMON CAUSES OF HESITANCY

Negative healthcare experience

Sometimes, people feel like they aren't being heard when they talk to their healthcare provider. Short appointments and rushed visits can leave families feeling dismissed or brushed off, even when that's not the intention.

Big takeaway: If someone shares that they didn't feel listened to, encourage them to have another conversation with their provider. Many healthcare professionals truly want to help, and better communication can make a big difference. If communication with the provider doesn't improve, support them in finding a provider who listens with care and takes time to answer their questions.



Peer groups

We're all shaped by the people around us. It's completely normal to be influenced by the thoughts and experiences of friends and family. So if someone's community includes people who are hesitant about vaccines, it's understandable that they might start to have doubts too.

Big takeaway: Just because a message is loud doesn't mean it's coming from the majority. A small group of vocal voices can sometimes drown out the broader consensus. That's why it's so important to add your voice and talk about the positive impact of vaccines—your voice can help bring balance and clarity to the conversation.

COMMON CAUSES OF HESITANCY

Conspiracy theories

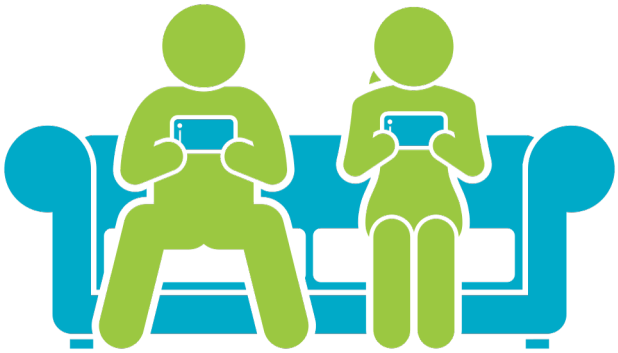
Conspiracy theories can feel hard to understand if you don't share the same views. But they're often rooted in deeper emotions—like frustration, fear, or feelings of injustice (real or perceived).

Big takeaway: Stay calm and curious. Don't dismiss or mock these beliefs. Instead, ask thoughtful questions and encourage reflection. As psychologist Jovan Byford explains, many people who believe in conspiracy theories see themselves as careful thinkers. Show that you respect their desire to understand the truth. Your goal isn't to shut that curiosity down—but to help guide it in a healthier direction. Be patient. These beliefs often take time to form, and it may take time to shift them too.

Media and social media

This is a big one. Social media, in particular, plays a huge role in how people form beliefs about vaccines. It can be a great place for connection, but it can also spread a lot of confusion and misinformation—fast.

Big takeaway: Be a positive voice online. When you share accurate, trustworthy information, you help push back against myths and confusion. Even better—step away from the screen and talk face-to-face when you can. Personal stories, real conversations, and kind connections can go a long way. You'll find more tips on how to navigate social media and talk about misinformation later in this toolkit—and we even have a podcast on it!



HOW PEOPLE MAKE DECISIONS

Emotions

We all like to think we make decisions based on facts and logic—but the truth is, emotions play a big part too. That's not a flaw—it's human nature. Especially when it comes to something as personal and important as our children's health.

When we're talking with people who feel unsure about vaccines, it helps to keep in mind that their concerns may come from a place of deep care. Emotions aren't a barrier to decision-making—they're a part of it. And when we understand that, we can connect in a more compassionate and supportive way.

What emotions mean for vaccine decisions

Vaccination decisions are often about love and protection. For many families, it's emotional because it involves something incredibly precious —the safety of their children. Facts and science matter deeply, but they may not feel like enough unless we also speak to the heart. By recognizing the emotions involved, we open the door to understanding, trust, and more meaningful conversations.

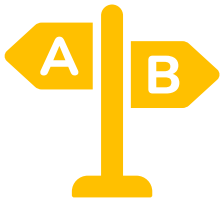
Time

It's very common to hear someone say, "I just need more time to think about this." That makes sense—big decisions often feel like they deserve space. But interestingly, research shows that when people take *too* long, their confidence in the decision can weaken. Instead of feeling more confident, they may feel more unsure.

What time means for vaccine decisions

The key isn't to rush, but to offer timely support. Helping someone find clear, compassionate answers—without unnecessary delays—can ease anxiety and build confidence. The longer someone feels stuck, the harder it can be to move forward. So let's help them feel ready, not rushed.

HOW PEOPLE MAKE DECISIONS



Options

More choices can sometimes feel like more freedom—but when the stakes are high, too many options can be overwhelming. This is known as "choice overload," and it can make decision-making exhausting. When every path has pros and cons, it's easy to freeze up or second-guess.

What option-overload means for vaccine decisions

When someone brings up a lot of questions or concerns, try gently guiding the conversation to what's most pressing for them. Ask, "What's your biggest question right now?" Focusing on that one thing can make the path forward feel clearer and more manageable.

Social norms

Social norms are the unspoken rules that shape our everyday lives. They're not written down, but we all follow them—like leaving a seat between strangers at the movies. These quiet expectations influence what we feel is "normal" or acceptable in our communities.

What social norms mean for vaccine decisions

Vaccinating children is actually a common practice—it's something most families already do. But when we talk about it more, we help make it *feel* more normal and supported. Celebrating and acknowledging others who vaccinate helps reinforce vaccination as a caring, responsible choice.

Herd mentality

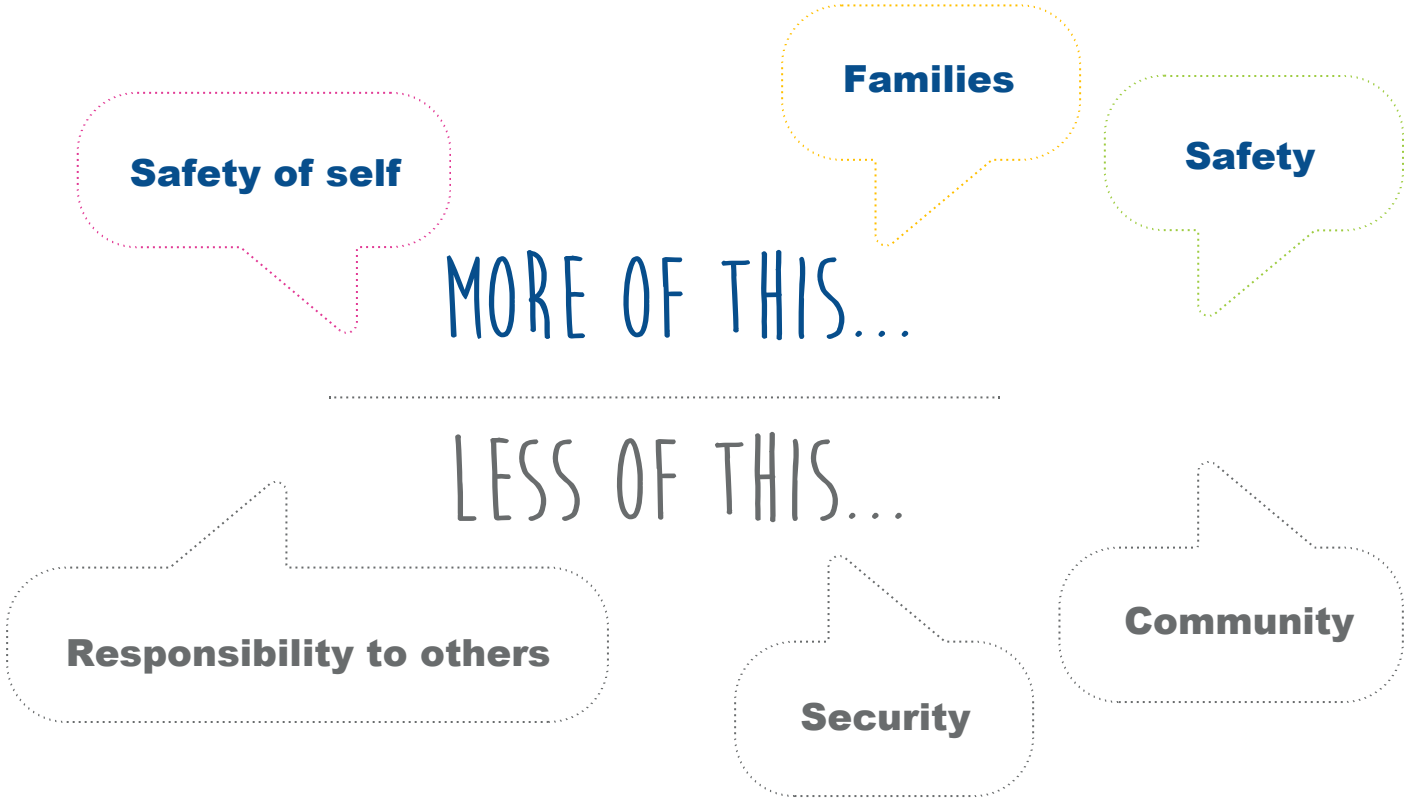
We tend to move with our group—friends, family, neighbors. That's natural. We trust the people we love, and their beliefs often shape ours. This is called herd mentality, and it can be either helpful or harmful, depending on what the group believes.

What herd mentality means for vaccine decisions

If someone you care about is part of a group that questions or opposes vaccines, it may be hard for them to step outside of that view. But you can be the person who gently introduces a different perspective. By listening first, and sharing information thoughtfully, you might help widen the circle of trust and open the door to new possibilities.

Let's get started

This is where things get real. These next steps are all about how to actually have meaningful, respectful conversations with people who are hesitant about vaccines. If you've ever wondered *what to say* or *how to say it*, you're in the right place.



Yes, you should talk to someone who's hesitant

It might feel like it's better to stay quiet—maybe you've worried about seeming pushy or judgmental. But here's the thing: many people who are hesitant aren't closed off. They're curious. They have questions. And they're looking for someone they trust to talk to. That can be *you*.

- Want to be more active online? Learn more about social media advocacy.
- Want to support people in your life? Learn more about becoming a Trusted Messenger.

A few things to keep in mind

Don't wait until you're perfect.

You might say something awkward. You might not have every answer. That's okay. What matters is that you're coming from a place of honesty and kindness. People respond to that.

What feels helpful to you might feel pushy to them.

We often want to "convince" people, but it's better to focus on *supporting* them. Let them know you're not trying to make decisions for them—you just want to share reliable information they can use.

Questions are a good thing.

Some people feel afraid to ask questions because they think they'll be judged or dismissed. But asking is how we all learn. Welcome their curiosity and make space for their concerns.

How you show up matters.

People decide whether to trust us not just by what we say, but *how* we say it. Listen more than you talk. Be calm, open, and informed. Be someone they feel safe coming to—even if they don't agree with you right away.

This is a process, not a one-time conversation.

Most people who are hesitant aren't flat-out refusing—they just need time, space, and support. Be patient. Trust builds slowly, and that's okay.

Training helps.

There are proven ways to guide conversations and reduce hesitancy. You can learn strategies that make a real difference. Check out training opportunities here.

TALKING WITH VACCINE-HESITANT PEOPLE

USE THIS SIMPLE, research-based framework to help make your conversations more effective and less stressful—for both of you.

Set the stage.

Create a space where the person feels safe and heard.

- *Be empathetic:* Try to see the situation from their perspective.
- *Avoid conflict:* You can disagree respectfully, but don't turn it into a debate.
- *Really listen:* If you're just waiting to talk, you'll miss what matters most.

Ask about their biggest concern.

Instead of covering a long list of issues, focus on one thing at a time. Ask, "What's your biggest question or concern?"

Validate their feelings.

Even if you don't agree, you can acknowledge that their concerns are real to *them*. Respect goes a long way.

Use open-ended questions.

Instead of "Do you trust vaccines?" try "What's been on your mind about the vaccine?" These kinds of questions invite real conversation.

Ask permission before sharing information.

Say something like, "Would you like to hear what I've learned?" That small act of permission can help the other person feel in control.

Affirm their strengths.

Remind them that they're thoughtful, that they care about their family, and that they've made smart choices before. Help them see that they *can* do this.

Be patient.

Changing your mind—especially about something emotional or complicated—takes time. If they're not ready, that's okay. Your goal isn't to win an argument. It's to keep the door open.

The 4-A Approach to vaccine conversations

We get it—these conversations can feel overwhelming. That's why we love the **4-A Approach**: a simple, practical way to support vaccine-hesitant people with empathy and clarity. This method helps people feel heard, respected, and empowered to make informed decisions for themselves and their families. Four steps. Easy to remember. Super effective. Let's dive in:

ASK

Start by inviting the person to share their biggest concern. Be curious, not judgmental. *"What's the one thing that concerns you the most?" "I'd really like to understand—can you tell me more about it?"* Narrowing concerns down to one issue makes it easier to have a focused, meaningful conversation.

ACKNOWLEDGE

Let them know you see the thought they've put into the issue. Recognize that they've been doing their homework. *"It's clear you've been thinking a lot about this." "You've looked into this carefully—I respect that."* People are more open to information when they feel respected, not dismissed.

AFFIRM

Reinforce that it's completely okay to have questions. Questions are how we learn. *"That's a totally valid question—I actually wondered the same thing." "You're not alone. A lot of people are asking that too."* This creates a safe space where they feel comfortable being honest and curious.

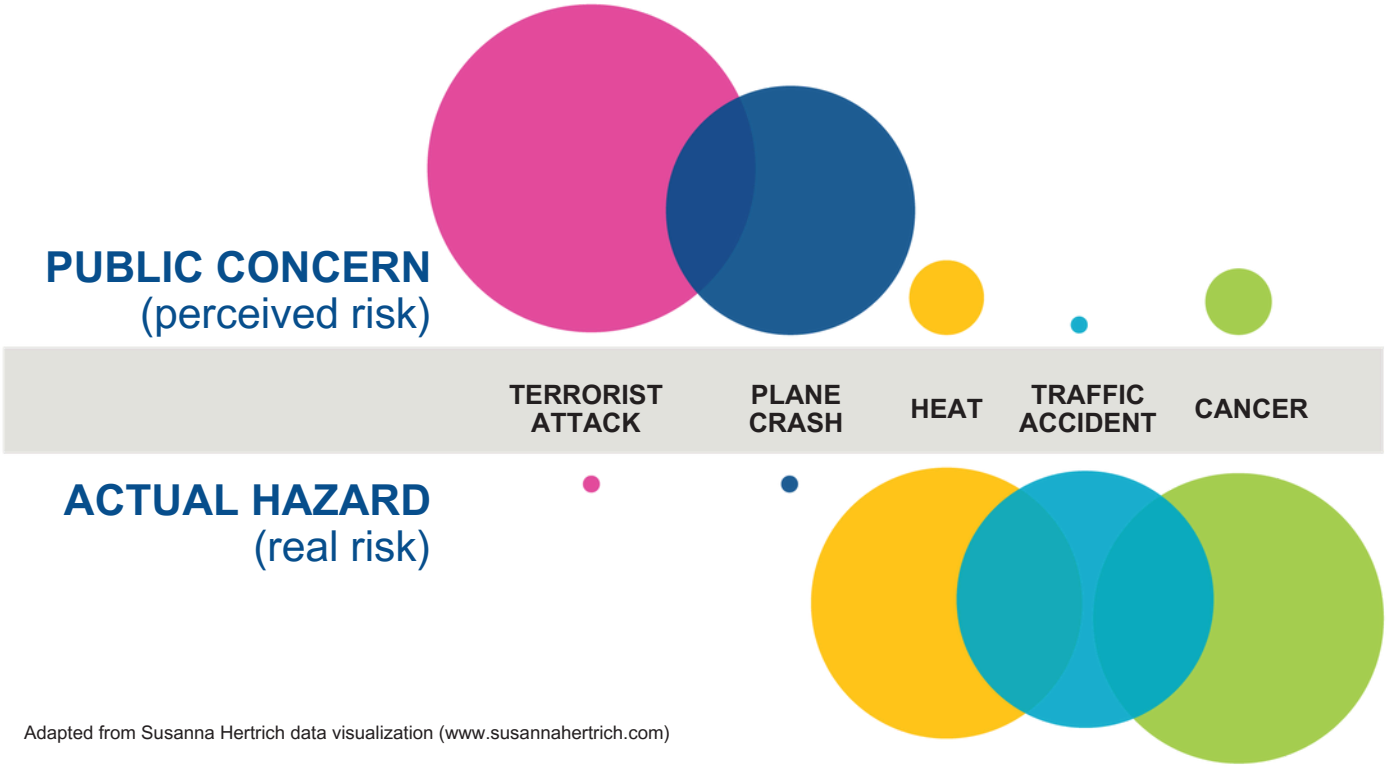
ANSWER

Before jumping in with facts, ask if they're open to hearing more. *"Would it be okay if I shared something I've learned?" "Can I send you a couple of reliable sources I found helpful?"* Asking permission gives the other person a sense of control—and makes it more likely they'll really hear you.

Understanding risk perception

The science is solid. But fear? Fear is powerful.

Fear has a big impact on our decisions. It motivates what we do—and what we avoid. And when it comes to vaccines, fear can sometimes cloud our understanding of what's actually risky (vaccine-preventable diseases) and what's not (vaccination).



Adapted from Susanna Hertrich data visualization (www.susannahertrich.com)

We're not great at judging risk. And that's okay.

Most of us struggle to accurately assess risk. It's human. We tend to *overestimate* rare, dramatic events (like a plane crash or a rare vaccine reaction) and *underestimate* everyday risks (like getting in a car accident or catching a contagious illness).

Risk perception is influenced by all kinds of things—news headlines, our emotions, past experiences, even our personalities. Just look at the data: many people fear a terrorist attack more than a traffic accident, even though traffic accidents are far more common and dangerous.

Why we misjudge risk

A lot of things influence how risky something *feels*, even if the numbers say otherwise. Here's what plays into that:

COGNITIVE FACTORS	How serious something seems, how much attention it gets in the media, and whether we feel in control of the outcome.
EMOTIONAL FACTORS	Our fears, gut feelings, and even our mood.
CONTEXTUAL FACTORS	How the information is presented, and where we're getting it from.
COGNITIVE FACTORS	Our past experiences, personality traits, and background.

So how does this relate to vaccines?

When people are hesitant about vaccines, risk perception is often at play. The problem is, many people overestimate the risk of the vaccine, and underestimate the risk of the disease it prevents.

Let's take a real-world example:

- The risk of developing a blood clot from the Johnson & Johnson COVID-19 vaccine is **about 0.0000088%**. That's **less likely than getting hit by a falling plane part while sitting at home**.
- The risk of developing a blood clot from *severe* COVID-19? **31%**.
- That's **340,000 out of every 1.1 million people** who get really sick.

THE TRUTH?

The far greater risk is with the disease—not the vaccine.

How to help people better understand risk

When you're talking with someone who's hesitant about vaccines, here are three powerful strategies:

1

Compare the risks in a relatable way

Put the vaccine risk into perspective. *"The chance of a severe vaccine reaction is one in a million. That's much lower than the one in three thousand chance of being struck by lightning." "If you're not worried about lightning, maybe the vaccine risk doesn't need to feel scary either."*

2

Lay out the real risk of vaccinating vs. not vaccinating

Most people don't realize how serious the diseases and their complications are. *"Nine out of ten unvaccinated people exposed to measles will get sick. 1 in 1,000 will develop brain swelling. But only 1 in a million will have a serious vaccine side effect."* The **benefits** of vaccines always outweigh the risks. That's built into the vaccine approval process.

3

Reframe the fear

People fear what feels unknown. But in truth, **vaccines are deeply researched**—more than 100 years of data and billions of doses that have been given safely. *"I understand being nervous about vaccine side effects—I've had that fear, too. But what I'm really worried about is the disease itself." "Long COVID is still being studied, but it's already linked to brain changes, heart issues, and more. That's what scares me."*

Fear the disease, not the vaccine

- The risk of a serious vaccine reaction? **1 in 1 million.**
- The risk of dying from tetanus if unvaccinated? **30%.**

If 1 million unvaccinated people got tetanus, 300,000 would die.

If 1 million people got the tetanus vaccine, *one* might have a serious reaction.

1 in one million

risk of a serious vaccine reaction

CHANCE IN ONE MILLION OF...

9,345

dying from a car accident

8,248

dying from sunstroke

2,535

dying from choking on food

7

dying from a lightening strike

Source: National Safety Council and CDC

The science is settled. Really.

Don't let misinformation muddy the waters. Here's what's true:

- **Vaccines have been researched for more than a century**
- **Thousands of studies involving millions of people support vaccine safety**
- **Millions and millions of children have safely received vaccines**
- **Vaccines prevent deadly diseases—and save lives**

What's still uncertain?

The long-term effects of some emerging diseases, like COVID-19. A year into the pandemic, researchers were uncovering alarming findings—for example, around one in three people who recovered from COVID experienced some sort of brain injury. That's why it's so important to protect ourselves from the virus. Vaccines, which are thoroughly studied and tested, offer a proven way to help prevent these potentially serious disease outcomes.

STILL WORRIED?

That's okay. The key is helping people feel safe enough to learn more. Risk perception is about feelings as much as facts—so let's speak to both.

COMMON VACCINE HESITANCY ISSUES

ONCE SOMEONE has invited you into a conversation about their vaccine concerns, you've already made progress. Now it's your turn to offer facts—kindly, clearly, and confidently.

Here are some fast facts and key messages that can help you respond to common concerns, while keeping risk perception and trust front and center.

Fast facts to keep handy

- **Vaccines are the most studied medical intervention in history.** Literally. They've been around for more than 100 years and have been studied in every way imaginable.
- **Thousands of rigorous studies involving millions of people show vaccines are well-tested and beneficial.** That's not hype—it's hard science.
- **The benefits of vaccines far outweigh the very small vaccine risks.** Severe side effects are *incredibly* rare—about 1 in a million doses.
- **Vaccine safety doesn't stop once a vaccine is approved.** Every single dose is monitored for safety as long as the vaccine is in use. It's one of the most comprehensive safety systems in public health.
- **Vaccine recommendations come from global and national experts**—who talk to each other. Over 170 countries have expert groups (called National Immunization Technical Advisory Groups [NITAGs]) that evaluate vaccines. In the United States, it's the Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices (ACIP). These groups share information constantly to keep the public safe.
- **Vaccine development is incredibly rigorous.** Before a vaccine is even considered for approval, tens of thousands of volunteers take part in carefully designed safety trials.
- **Science isn't the same as a search engine.** Scientists dedicate their entire careers to studying these issues. Be cautious of anyone claiming "I did my own research," especially if they're not a trained medical expert.

COMMON VACCINE HESITANCY ISSUES

Key messages to share

- **Vaccines are very safe.** We're talking about *one serious adverse event per million doses*. That's a higher safety bar than most things in our daily lives.
- **When vaccines are introduced, disease-related deaths and disabilities drop dramatically.** The impact is real, visible, and backed by decades of data.
- **Credible sources of information matter.** Choose trusted, credible sources—especially those without a personal or financial stake in the outcome.

Debunking disinformation (without arguing)

We know how tough it can be to push back against false information—especially online. The good news? You don't have to do it alone.

Use our debunking app

(available on Apple Store and Google Play) to access up-to-date, evidence-based responses to the latest vaccine myths.

Sign up for "Just the Facts: Correcting This Week's Misinformation,"

our weekly newsletter that breaks down common misinformation and how to respond.

Let's bring back respect for expertise

We live in a time where experts are often questioned—and everyone feels like they have to become one. No wonder things feel so confusing.

But here's the thing: **expertise matters.**

If you wouldn't fix your car engine with a few YouTube videos, you shouldn't base health decisions on a couple of Google searches either. And that's not a criticism—it's just reality.

Scientists spend *years* learning how to do research right. They understand things like:

- What makes a study reliable
- How to interpret a p-value
- Whether a sample size is large enough to trust the results
- How to evaluate and compare complex findings

Even people who read academic journals might miss key context or misread the data. That's why it's okay to say, "I trust the experts."

And remember—**no one is an expert in everything.**

- A cardiologist might know your heart inside and out, but not vaccine science.
- A brilliant immunologist may not be the right person to guide your mental health journey.

EXPERTISE IS DEEP, NOT BROAD.

And when it comes to vaccines, we've got experts who have dedicated their entire professional lives to getting this right. So let's trust the vaccine experts to help us with vaccines—just like we trust mechanics to fix our cars.

EVALUATING VACCINE INFORMATION

IN A WORLD where social media is one of our main sources of news, it's more important than ever to know how to separate fact from fiction—especially when it comes to something as personal and important as your health.

Let's break down how to spot credible vaccine information and avoid the stuff that can lead people astray.

What's the difference between misinformation, disinformation, and malinformation?

Not all wrong info is created equal. Here's what you need to know:

FALSE → **HARMFUL**

Misinformation is false, but not on purpose. Maybe it's an honest mistake, a misunderstood meme, or someone sharing satire thinking it's real.

Disinformation is false *on purpose*. It's created to trick or deceive people.

Malinformation is when true information is twisted or shared with harmful intent—often taken out of context to scare or mislead.

UNDERSTAND THE INTENTION

behind the information can help you decide how to respond—or whether to engage at all.

EVALUATING VACCINE INFORMATION

How to find (and trust) credible information

When it comes to making decisions about your health—or your child's—expert advice matters.

So, who are the vaccine experts? They're the people who've spent their careers studying vaccines: Doctors. Scientists. Public health professionals.

Here's how to make sure you're getting info from reliable sources:

- **Talk to your healthcare provider.** They know your medical history and can guide you based on your personal needs.
- **Stick with trusted websites.** Think CDC, WHO, local health departments, and reputable medical institutions.
- **Be cautious with influencers or "experts" without medical credentials.** A lot of people sound convincing online, but that doesn't mean they know what they're talking about.

Would you let a mechanic perform heart surgery? Of course not. And you wouldn't let a heart surgeon fix your brakes either. Let's trust vaccine experts with vaccines.

Helpful hints for navigating the internet (especially social media)

- **Use social media for connection, not information.** Memes aren't medicine. TikToks aren't peer-reviewed.
- **Report harmful or misleading posts.** Misinformation spreads fast—but so does truth, when we speak up.
- **Think critically before you share or believe something:**
  - Who's the author? What are their credentials?
  - Are they trying to sell something—or stir up fear?
  - Do the sources check out? Are they legitimate and unbiased?
  - Does this feel *too perfect* because it agrees with what you already believe?

That last one is important—it's called **confirmation bias**, and it's something we all fall into sometimes.

The problem with "Doing my own research"

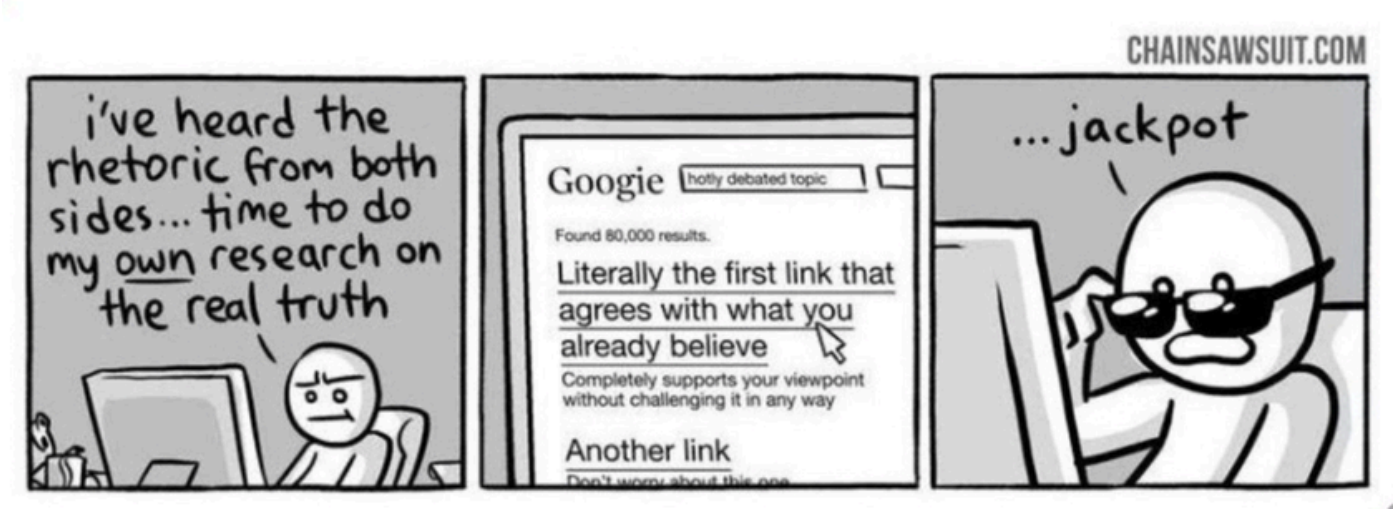
You've probably heard this before: *"I don't trust the experts—I do my own research."*

And sure, that sounds responsible at first. But here's the thing—**real research is a skill**.

Unless you've been trained to:

- Recognize bias
- Analyze study design
- Interpret data and statistical significance

… it's easy to misread things or be misled. A Google rabbit hole isn't the same as years of scientific training.



THAT DOESN'T MEAN

you shouldn't ask questions. You absolutely should. Just make sure you're getting answers from people who know what they're talking about.

Why storytelling is a secret superpower

When it comes to talking about vaccines, stories matter—maybe even more than data.

Here's why:
- Most of us aren't scientists—data can feel abstract or even overwhelming.
- We make decisions with our hearts and our heads.
- Stories are personal. Relatable. Human.
- Honestly? Stories are just more interesting.

SO IF YOU'VE GOT A STORY

—share it. People remember stories long after they forget numbers.

Tips for telling your story well

- Tailor it to your audience. What will they connect with?
- Know your "why." What message are you trying to get across?
- Show what happened—don't just explain the takeaway.
- Keep it short and focused.
- Make it personal. Speak from your own experience.
- Use empathy and emotion—but stay authentic.
- And most importantly, don't make yourself the hero.

PRACTICE YOUR STORY

so it feels natural—not like a speech.

HOW YOU CAN MAKE A DIFFERENCE

WANT TO BE part of the solution? You totally can.

1. Learn how to engage on social media in helpful, positive ways.

2. Take the **Vaccine Quest** to deepen your understanding.

3. Become a **Trusted Vaccine Messenger** in your community.

4. Join our amazing network of **Vax Ambassadors**, **Social Media Ninjas**, and other volunteers.

5. Share your personal vaccine story on our blog—because your voice might be exactly what someone else needs to hear.

www.VoicesForVaccines.org