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Vaccine Access and Hesitancy: The Public Health Importance of Vaccines

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By [Stephanie Miceli](#)

Images of deserted streets, empty subway cars, and shuttered businesses paint a bleak picture of life during the COVID-19 pandemic. While health experts say a vaccine to prevent COVID-19 infection is needed to return to “normal,” several polls have indicated some Americans would be reluctant to receive a vaccine, citing safety concerns. The spread of disinformation on social media has only further complicated matters.

“We’re not going to get to reopening economies without effective treatment and control – and that includes vaccines,” said Peter Daszak, president of the EcoHealth Alliance, during a recent National Academies virtual workshop on vaccine hesitancy. “A COVID-19 vaccine doesn’t exist yet, but we’ve already seen hints of mistrust on social media. ‘Is it going to be harmful? Do we need it?’”

In 2019, the World Health Organization listed vaccine hesitancy as one of the 10 biggest threats to global health. Vaccine hesitancy is different from the anti-vaccine movement, emphasized Eve Dubé, senior researcher at the National Institute of Public Health of Quebec. It refers to the reluctance to vaccinate, despite the availability of vaccines; whereas the anti-vaccine movement refers to the outright refusal to vaccinate under all circumstances. Vaccine hesitant parents can be moved toward acceptance, said Dubé – but it may take a few visits or consultations.

What’s Driving Vaccine Hesitancy?

Questions about safety and effectiveness aren’t the only contributors to vaccine hesitancy, said moderator Heidi Larson, professor of anthropology, risk, and decision science at the London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine. Inherent mistrust in government and health care institutions also play a role.

“The issue of equity in itself is a driver of vaccine hesitancy. In the days of polio, people said, ‘we don’t even have running water. You don’t care about us, [so] why should we trust you about vaccines?’”

Robin Nandy, UNICEF principal adviser and chief of immunization, also referred to the concept of the “intent-to-action” gap. “Often there’s the intent to vaccinate, but then families realize they don’t have time, they can’t afford the out-of-pocket expenses, or there are transportation barriers.”

Well before the coronavirus pandemic, measles, polio, and other vaccines were out of reach for 20 million children below the age of 1 every year, said Nandy. He described the unique challenges of vaccine uptake among four populations – people in remote rural areas, the urban poor, people in

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Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) News and Resources from the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine.

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