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RESEARCH AND DELIVERY SCIENCE

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CHILDREN'S HOSPITAL COLORADO



Communicating Effectively with Vaccine-Hesitant Patients

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Disclosures

The presenters have no financial relationships with the manufacturer(s) of any commercial product(s) and/or provider(s) of commercial services discussed in this presentation.





Session Objectives

- **Summarize key evidence** on vaccine effectiveness, safety, and public health impact most relevant to common questions from vaccine-hesitant patients.
- **Identify common concerns, misconceptions, and misinformation** that contribute to vaccine hesitancy across clinical settings.
- **Demonstrate and practice communication strategies** that combine empathy and evidence to build trust and support informed vaccine decision-making in one-on-one conversations.





Communication Objectives

- Understand How to use the presumptive format to initiate the vaccine discussion
- Understand Core MI spirit, skills, and strategies for working with vaccine hesitant patients
- Identify Common conversation traps
- Understand How to address myths and misinformation in conversation
- Apply Skills in using MI and addressing vaccine myths
- Develop A plan to integrate these skills into your usual practice



Agenda

1. Background
2. Why hesitancy happens
3. What works in vaccine communication
4. Presumptive recommendations
5. Motivational interviewing
6. Putting it together





Let's Take a Poll



How often do you leave a vaccine
conversation feeling frustrated or
unsure how it went?

Often

Sometimes

Rarely

Never



Background



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How effective is the influenza vaccine in these vials?



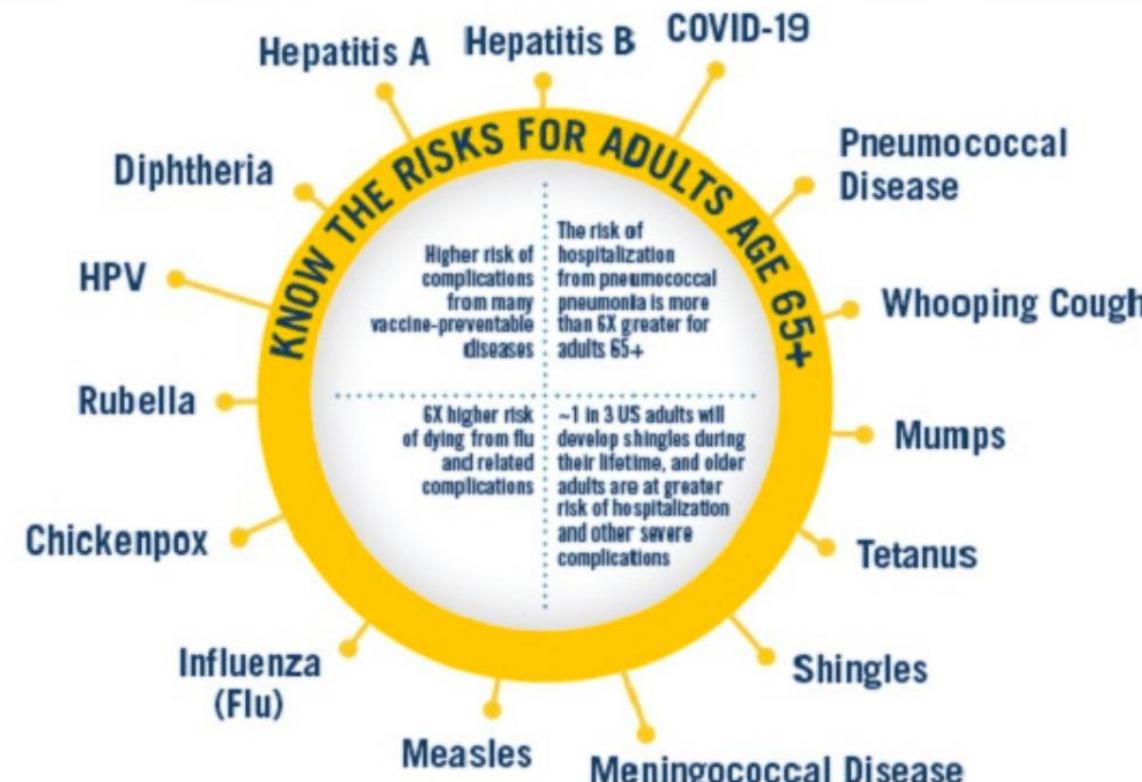
Image: <https://www.fda.gov/vaccines-blood-biologics/vaccines>

“Vaccines alone don’t save lives; Vaccination saves lives”





VACCINES ARE NOT JUST FOR CHILDREN **ADULTS 65+ CAN BE PROTECTED FROM DEADLY DISEASES**



<https://www.nfid.org/why-vaccinations-are-vital-for-older-adults/>





Figure 1: Benefits of Vaccination in Reducing Disease Burden



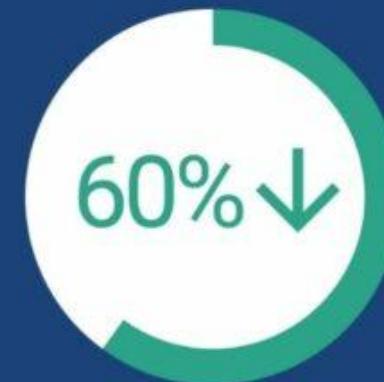
PNEUMOCOCCAL DISEASE

22% reduction in all-case **mortality** in adults with cardiovascular disease



FLU

50% reduction in risk of illness*



HEPATITIS B

Up to 60% reduction of acute hepatitis B, and 26% decrease in **mortality** related to chronic liver disease



HERPES ZOSTER

More than 90% effective in prevention of shingles and postherpetic neuralgia

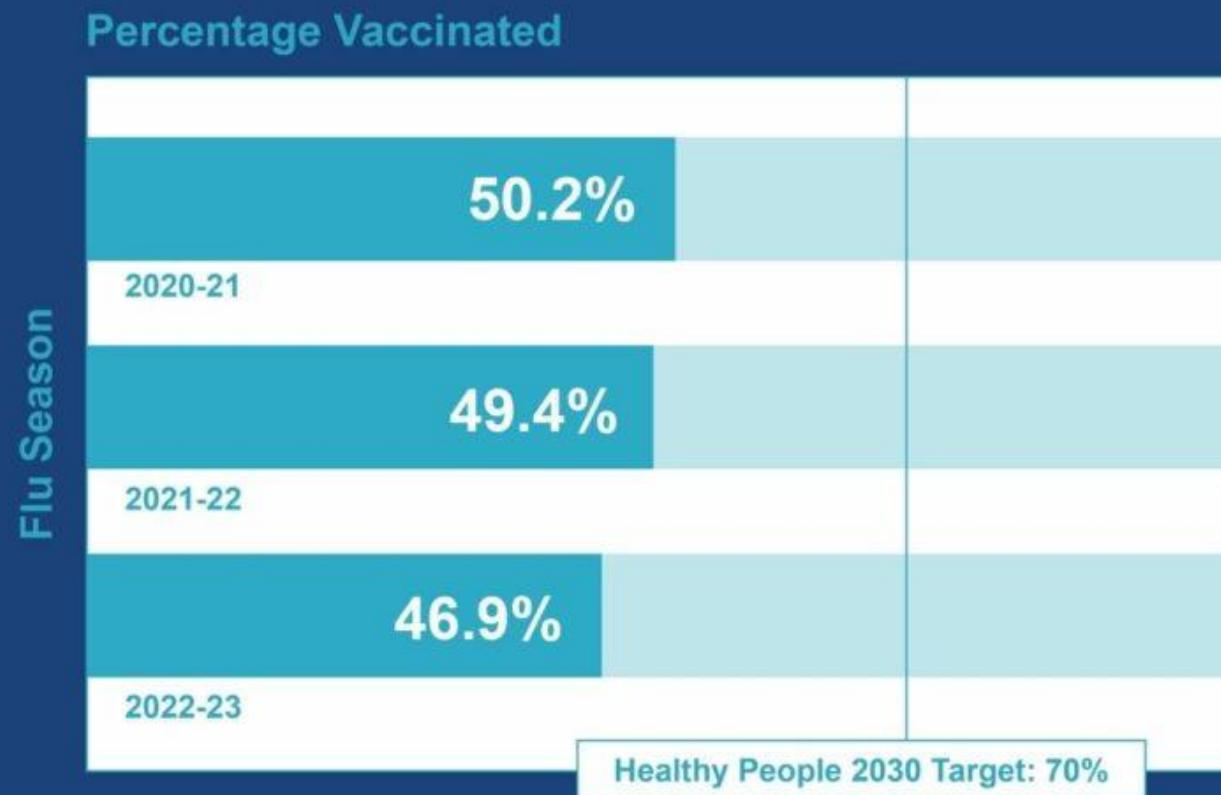
*In seasons when vaccine strains are well-matched to circulating strains

<https://www.nfid.org/resource/call-to-action-strategies-to-improve-adult-immunization-in-the-us/>





Figure 3: Declining Adult Influenza Vaccination Rates Lag Behind Public Health Target



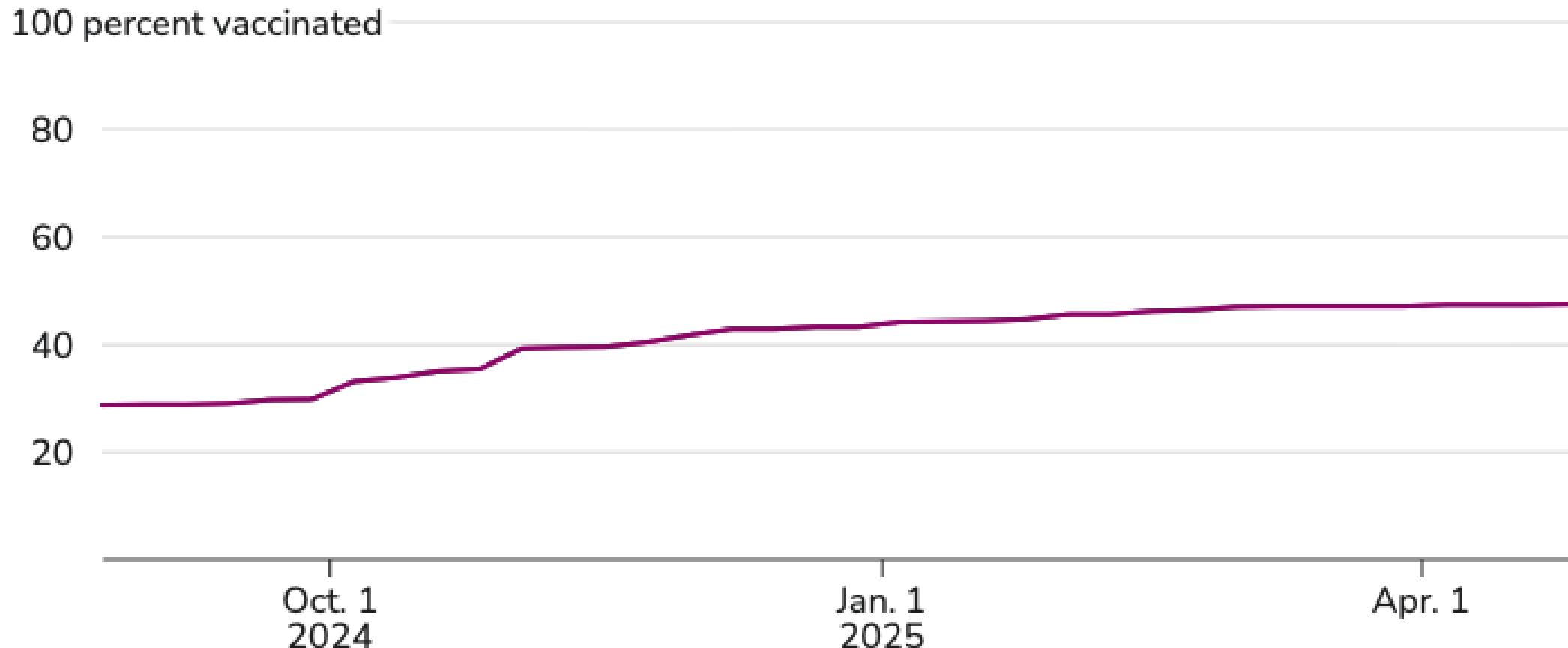
Data Source: CDC FluVaxView

<https://www.nfid.org/resource/call-to-action-strategies-to-improve-adult-immunization-in-the-us/>





Weekly cumulative percent of adults 75+ vaccinated with RSV vaccine



<https://www.cdc.gov/respiratory-viruses/data/vaccination-trends.html>



Why hesitancy happens



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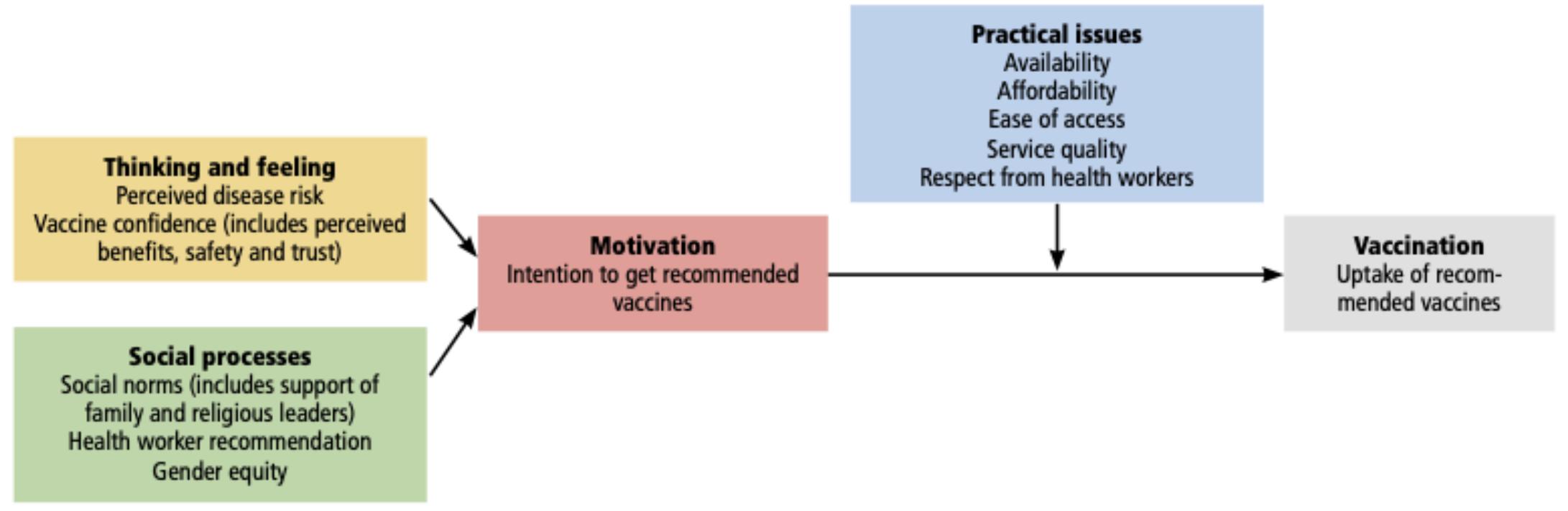
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Figure 1 **The WHO behavioural and social drivers of vaccination framework**

Figure 1 **Cadre OMS des facteurs comportementaux et sociaux de la vaccination**



<https://iris.who.int/bitstream/handle/10665/354458/WER9720-eng-fre.pdf?sequence=1>





Cowpox vaccine, 1802





City of Toronto Archives, Fonds 1244, Item 2517

Anti-Vaccination League of Canada, 1919

Image: <https://www.popsci.com/anti-vaccination-movements-measles-smallpox/>





Social Media, 2025

Image: <https://www.bbc.com/news/55101238>





Vaccine Hesitancy Continuum

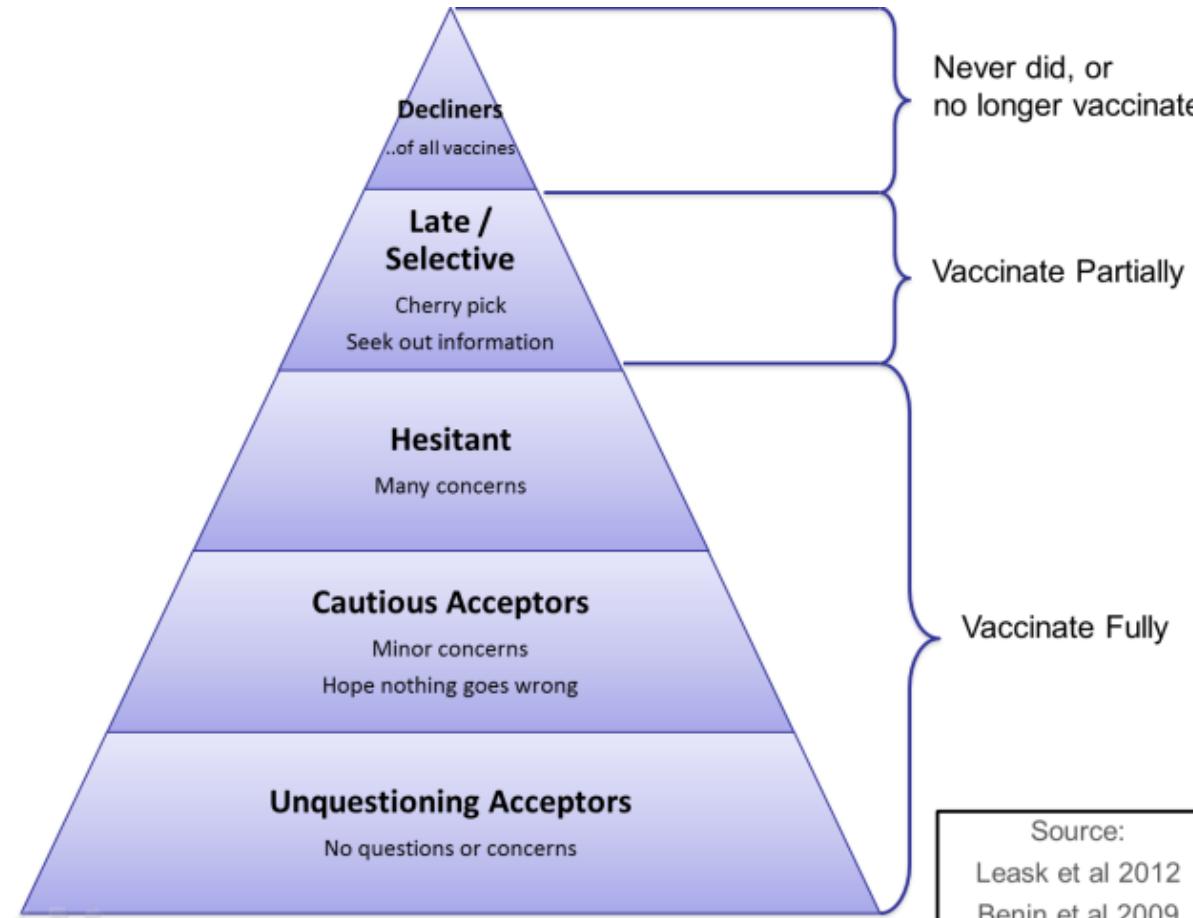
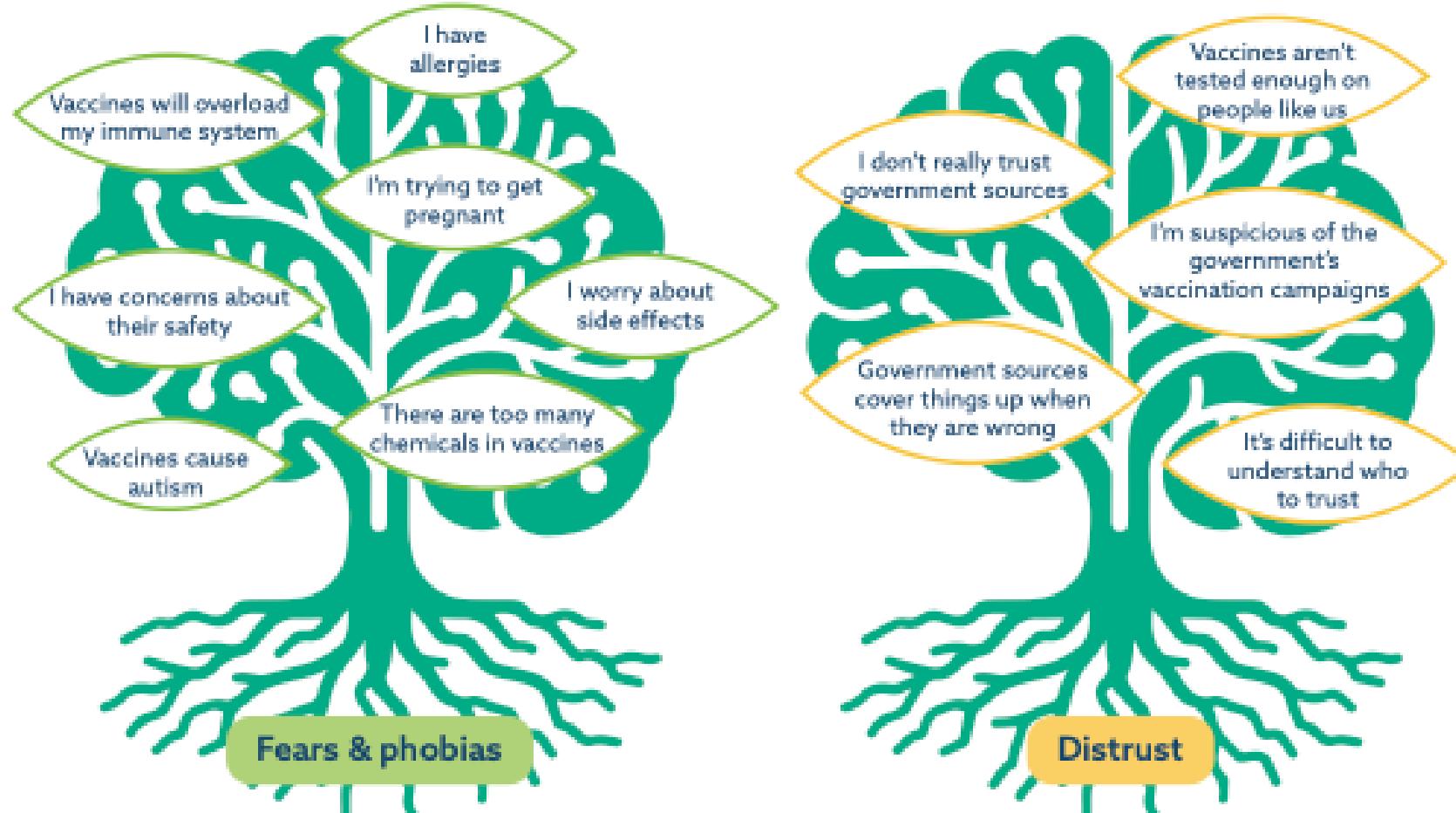


Image: <https://julieleask.wordpress.com/2015/05/12/improving-communication-about-vaccination-sarah/>





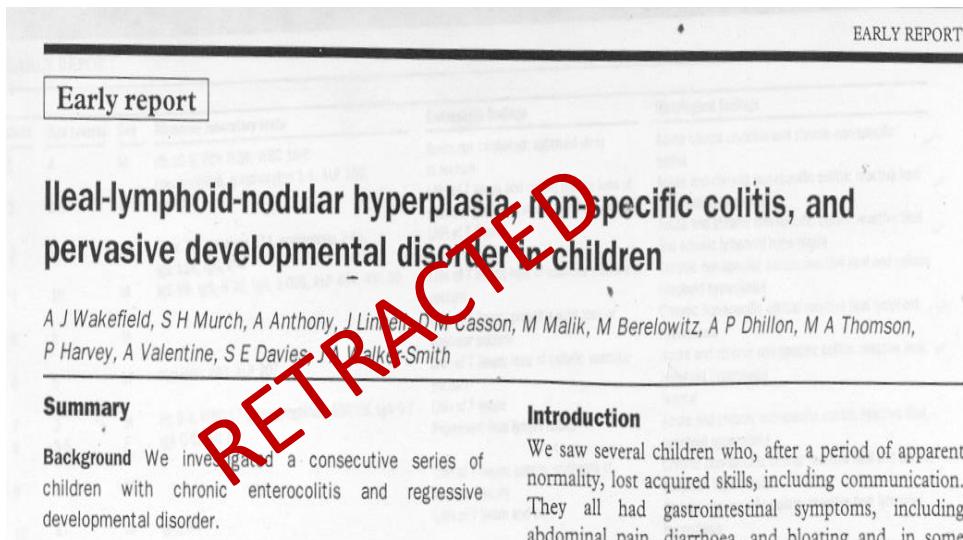
ATTITUDE ROOTS





The Autism Myth Example

The Lancet (1998), Wakefield et al. suggest a relationship between MMR vaccine and autism



- Case series methodology (12 cases)
- Most cases were self-referrals from anti-vaccine groups
- Several cases' symptoms began before (5) MMR vaccine
- Before submission, Wakefield had applied for patents on a vaccine to rival MMR vaccine
- Wakefield received >£400,000 from lawyers to prove the MMR vaccine was dangerous

Wakefield AJ, Murch SH, Anthony A, et al. Ileal-lymphoid-nodular hyperplasia, non-specific colitis, and pervasive developmental disorder in children [retracted in: Lancet. 2004 Mar 6;363(9411):750. doi: 10.1016/S0140-6736(04)15715-2]. Lancet. 1998;351(9103):637-641. doi:10.1016/s0140-6736(97)11096-0.





Table 1. Studies that fail to support an association between measles-mumps-rubella vaccine and autism.

Source	Study design	Study location
Taylor et al., 1999 [5]	Ecological	United Kingdom
Farrington et al., 2001 [6]	Ecological	United Kingdom
Kaye et al., 2001 [7]	Ecological	United Kingdom
Dales et al., 2001 [8]	Ecological	United States
Fombonne et al., 2006 [9]	Ecological	Canada
Fombonne and Chakrabarti, 2001 [10]	Ecological	United Kingdom
Taylor et al., 2002 [11]	Ecological	United Kingdom
DeWilde et al., 2001 [12]	Case-control	United Kingdom
Makela et al., 2002 [13]	Retrospective cohort	Finland
Madsen et al., 2002 [14]	Retrospective cohort	Denmark
DeStefano et al., 2004 [15]	Case-control	United States
Peltola et al., 1998 [16]	Prospective cohort	Finland
Patja et al., 2000 [17]	Prospective cohort	Finland

Image: Gerber JS, Offit PA
 Vaccines and autism: a
 tale of shifting
 hypotheses. *Clin Infect Dis*
 2009;48(4):456-461.
 doi:10.1086/596476



What works for vaccine communication



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Let's Take a Poll

How much do you agree or disagree
with the following statement:

**“I am usually able to convince hesitant
patients to vaccinate.”**

Strongly Agree

Agree

Disagree

Strongly Disagree





Childhood vaccines

Cochrane Review 2013: “The limited evidence available is low quality and suggests that face to face interventions to inform or educate parents about childhood vaccination have little to no impact on immunisation status, or knowledge or understanding of vaccination.”

Cochrane Review 2018: “There is low- to moderate-certainty evidence suggesting that face-to-face information or education may improve or slightly improve children's vaccination status, parents' knowledge, and parents' intention to vaccinate. Face-to-face interventions may be more effective in populations where lack of awareness or understanding of vaccination is identified as a barrier, e.g. where people are unaware of new or optional vaccines.”





Adult vaccines



Cochrane Database of Systematic Reviews

Interventions to improve vaccination uptake among adults
(Protocol)

Jaca A, Sishuba M, Jacobson Vann JC, Wiysonge CS, Ndwandwe D

PLANNED REVIEW
Protocol Only

Jaca A, Sishuba M, Jacobson Vann JC, Wiysonge CS, Ndwandwe D. Interventions to improve vaccination uptake among adults. Cochrane Database of Systematic Reviews 2021, Issue 11. Art. No.: CD015057. DOI: 10.1002/14651858.CD015057. Accessed 19 January 2026.

“Communication strategies: presumptive communication approach; gain-framed versus loss-framed communication; use of science and anecdotes; motivational interviewing; health coaching; clinicians providing a strong recommendation to the adult; and other communication tactics to facilitate decision-making.”





Addressing vaccine hesitancy is complicated! There are no easy solutions!





Image: <https://www.dreamstime.com/illustration/dont-do.html>





Effective Messages in Vaccine Promotion: A Randomized Trial

AUTHORS: Brendan Nyhan, PhD,^a Jason Reifler, PhD,^b Sean Richey, PhD,^c and Gary L. Freed, MD, MPH^{d,e}



WHAT'S KNOWN ON THIS SUBJECT:
measles-mumps-rubella immunizatio

Parents were randomly assigned to receive 1 of 4 interventions:

- (1)** info explaining the lack of evidence that MMR causes autism
- (2)** info about measles, mumps, and rubella from VIS
- (3)** images of children with measles, mumps, rubella
- (4)** a dramatic narrative about a severe case of measles
- (5)** Control group

Nyhan B, Reifler J, Richey S, Freed GL. Effective messages in vaccine promotion: a randomized trial. *Pediatrics*. 2014;133(4):e835-e842. doi:10.1542/peds.2013-2365





Effective Messages in Vaccine Promotion: A Randomized Trial

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WHAT'S KNOWN ON THIS SUBJECT:
measles-mumps-rubella immunizatio

- None of the interventions increased parental intent to vaccinate, and they often **BACKFIRED**
 - Refuting claims of an MMR/autism link **decreased** intent to vaccinate among parents who had the least favorable vaccine attitudes
 - Images of sick children **increased** expressed belief in a vaccine/autism link

Nyhan B, Reifler J, Richey S, Freed GL. Effective messages in vaccine promotion: a randomized trial. *Pediatrics*. 2014;133(4):e835-e842. doi:10.1542/peds.2013-2365





The Persuasion Trap

“You cannot reason people out of something they were not reasoned into.”

-Jonathan Swift, 1721

In the “Persuasion Trap,” the provider tries to convince hesitant patients of the benefits.

This assumes human decision-making is rational (**It is not!**)



or



?





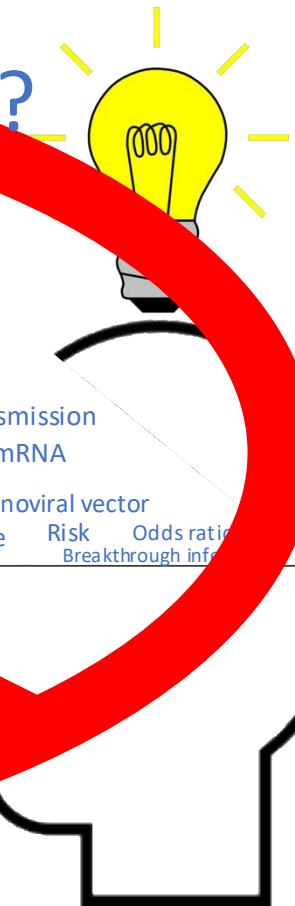
The Data Dump

What if we just give them more information?



$V_c = (1 - 1/R_0)/E$

Vaccine efficacy Side effects Cervical cancer
Phase 3 study Vaccine effectiveness HPV
 R_0 Surveillance VAERS Transmission
Herd immunity Clinical trials Variants mRNA
Boosters Side effects Respiratory failure Adenoviral vector
Risk of Death V-Safe Risk Odds ratio
Measles outbreak Breakthrough infection



Information deficit model = “data dump”





The Persuasion Trap



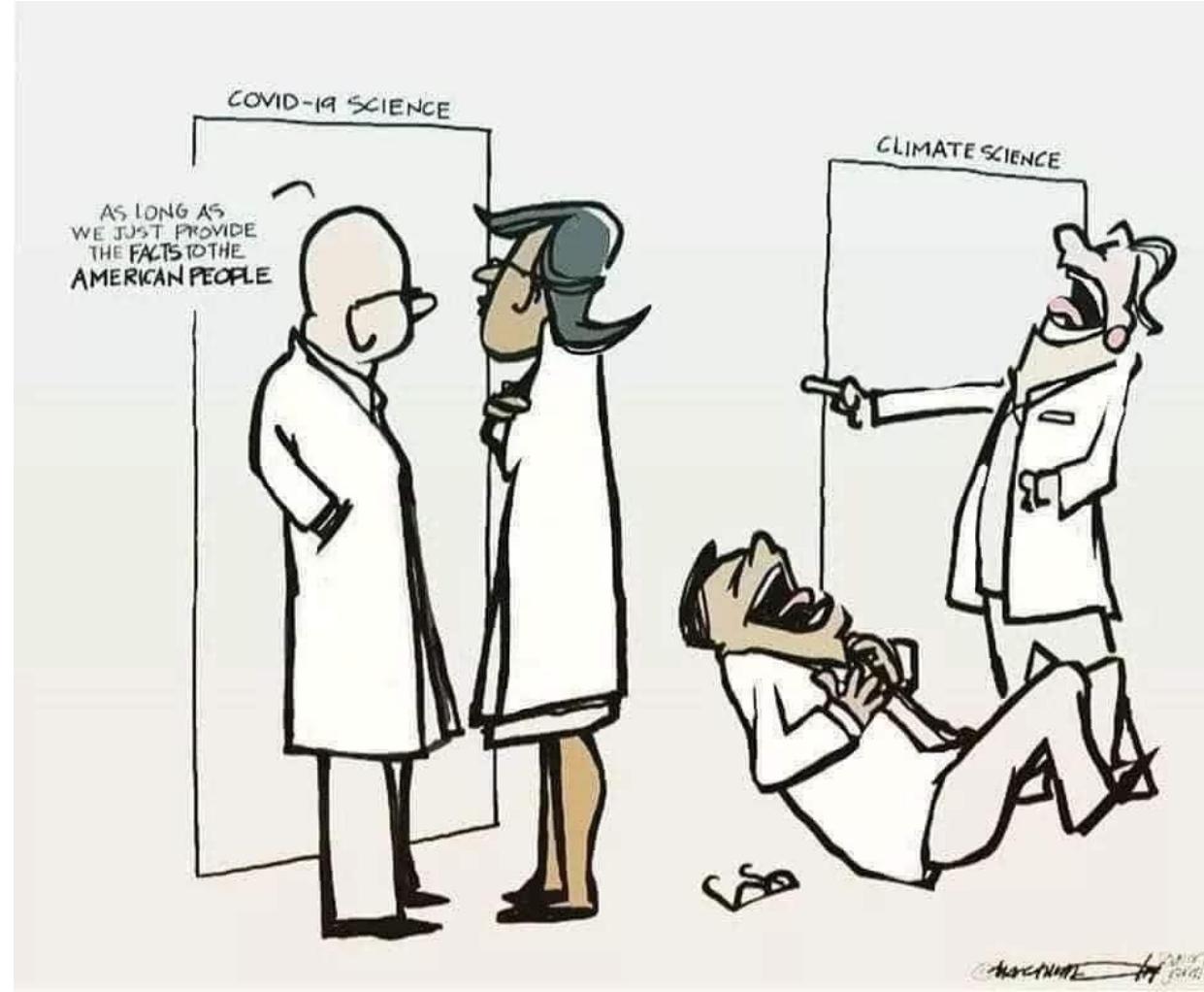


Image: <https://metanarrator.com/2020/08/12/a-farewell-to-facts/>





It's Not Just About the Facts

How we communicate about vaccines is just as important as **What** we communicate.

The facts are **necessary** but often **not sufficient**.



Image: <https://www.bridgemi.com/special-report/introduction-just-facts-2018-michigan>



So, what works?



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The Physician Communication Study (PCOM)

- Cluster RCT among 16 public and private practices in Colorado
- Multi-component intervention
 1. **HPV Fact Sheet developed by clinicians**
 2. **Communication training including Motivational Interviewing**
 3. **HPV Decision Aid**
 4. **Tailored web-based intervention**



JAMA Pediatrics | Original Investigation
Effect of a Health Care Professional Communication Training Intervention on Adolescent Human Papillomavirus Vaccination A Cluster Randomized Clinical Trial

Amanda F. Dempsey, MD, PhD, MPH; Jennifer Pyrznowski, MSPH; Steven Lockhart, MPH; Juliana Barnard, MA; Elizabeth J. Campagna, MS; Kathleen Garrett, MA; Allison Fisher, MPH; L. Miriam Dickinson, PhD; Sean T. O'Leary, MD, MPH





The Physician Communication Study (PCOM)

- Self-efficacy for changing parents' minds about HPV vaccine improved among clinicians
- Clinicians spent the same amount of time or less time on HPV vaccine discussions after the training.
- **9.5% higher** rates of in HPV vaccine initiation in training intervention clinics versus control clinics

JAMA Pediatrics | Original Investigation

Effect of a Health Care Professional Communication Training Intervention on Adolescent Human Papillomavirus Vaccination A Cluster Randomized Clinical Trial

Amanda F. Dempsey, MD, PhD, MPH; Jennifer Pyrznowski, MSPH; Steven Lockhart, MPH; Juliana Barnard, MA; Elizabeth J. Campagna, MS; Kathleen Garrett, MA; Allison Fisher, MPH; L. Miriam Dickinson, PhD; Sean T. O'Leary, MD, MPH





The Presumptive or Announcement Format

How does the PROVIDER initiate the vaccine discussion/plan? (N=93)

Presumptive (74%; N=69)

Participatory (26%; N=24)

How does PARENT respond to the provider's initiation?

Resists (26%; N=18)

Resists (83%; N=20)

Opel et al. *Pediatrics* 2013





Formats to Initiate the Vaccine Discussion

Presumptive / Announcement Format:

- A declarative statement
- Presupposes patient will vaccinate
- “Sara is due for 3 shots today.”

Participatory Format:

- An open-ended question
- Presupposes patient will question
- “How do you feel about shots today?”

Opel et al. *Pediatrics* 2013





Start the vaccine conversation by presuming parents or patients are interested in vaccinating

Example: "Sara is due for a flu shot today." or "Johnny needs 2 vaccines today to be up to date."

Example: "You are also due for the RSV vaccine."

Patient accepts vaccines (with or without subsequent questions)

Example: "OK."

Patient responds with questions or concerns

Example: "Umm...what are the side effects?"

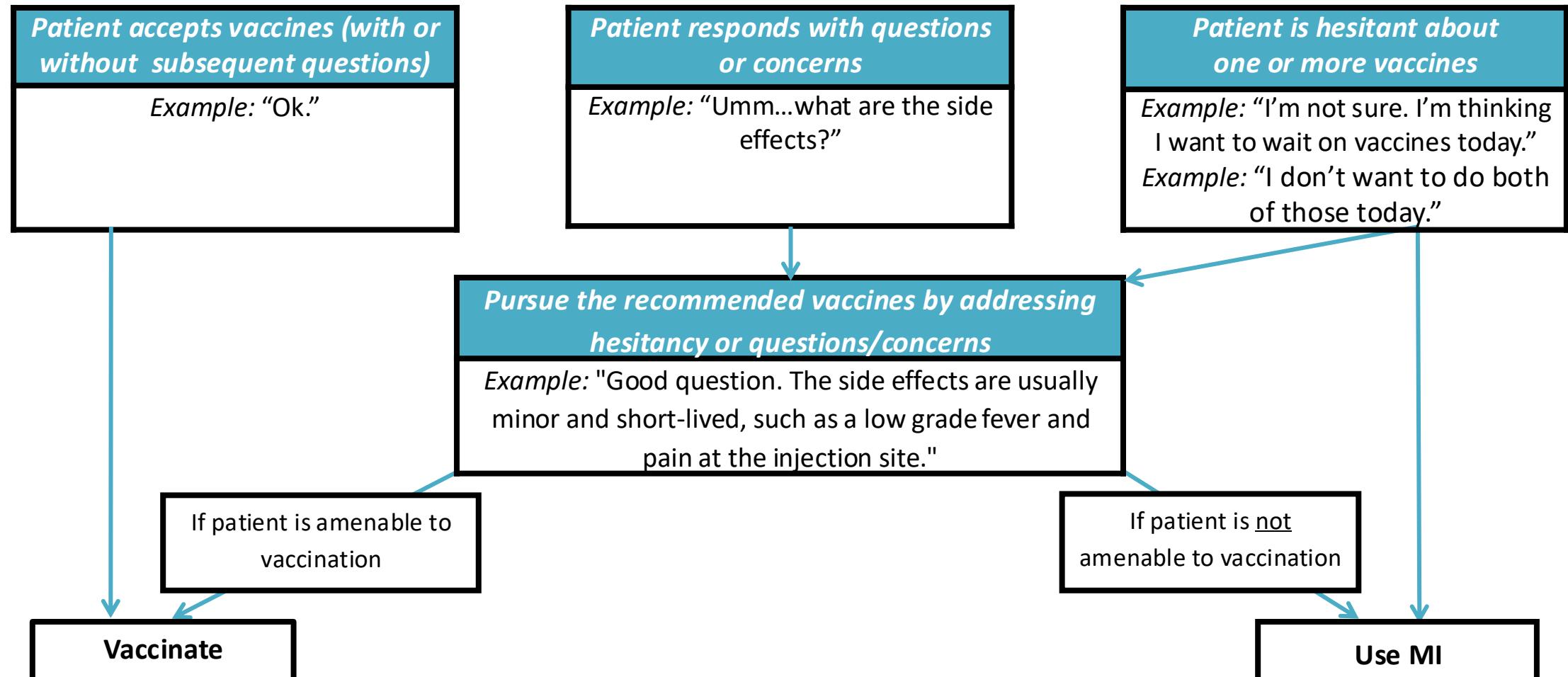
Patient is hesitant about one or more vaccines

Example: "I'm not sure. I'm thinking I want to wait on vaccines today."

Example: "I don't want to do both of those today."

Adapted from <https://publications.aap.org/pediatrics/article/153/3/e2023065483/196695/Strategies-for-Improving-Vaccine-Communication-and?autologincheck=redirected>





Adapted from <https://publications.aap.org/pediatrics/article/153/3/e2023065483/196695/Strategies-for-Improving-Vaccine-Communication-and?autologincheck=redirected>





Poll

Patient response: “Are there side effects from these vaccines that I should be worried about?”

**Which one of the dispositions
is the patient?**

*1. Patient accepts
vaccines (with or
without subsequent
questions)*

*2. Patient responds
with questions or
concerns*

*3. Patient is hesitant
about
one or more
vaccines*





Poll

Patient response: “Sounds good. Can you remind me what these vaccines are for?”

**Which one of the dispositions
is the patient?**

1. Patient accepts vaccines (with or without subsequent questions)

2. Patient responds with questions or concerns

3. Patient is hesitant about one or more vaccines

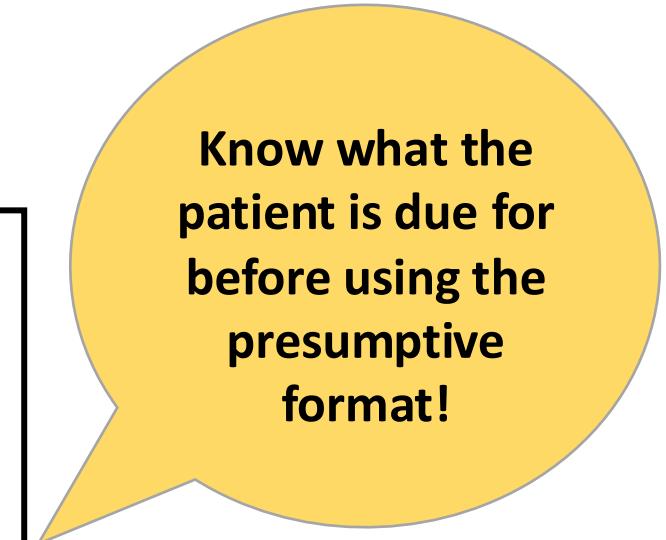




Presumptive Pearl # 1

Tone and body language matter.

When delivering the presumptive format:
make eye contact, square shoulders, and
don't be distracted.



Know what the patient is due for before using the presumptive format!





Standard 1

"I know we talked about vaccines last time. You are due for 3 shots today."

Standard 2

"I know we talked about vaccines last time, and I recommend you get these 3 shots today."

Standard 3

"I know we talked about vaccines last time, but I'd like to get you caught up today. You are due for 3 shots."

Standard 4

"I know you had some concerns last time, but you are due for 3 shots today."

You can use a presumptive format at a visit even though a patient has voiced resistance at an earlier visit.

AVOID THIS:

"I know we talked about this last time...what do you think about vaccines today?"





Poll



Let's Take a Poll

In your practice, who is usually the first person to talk with a family about vaccines during their visit?

1. Front desk or administrative staff member
2. Medical Assistant
3. Nurse
4. Clinician (physician, nurse practitioner, physician assistant)
5. Other





Medical assistants, nurses and other staff who communicate with patients about vaccines should use the presumptive format too.

"You are due for 3 shots today that we recommend to all our patients. "





You can still use a presumptive format after a MA, nurse, or other staff tells you the patient is hesitant.

Standard 1

“You are due for 3 shots today. The MA mentioned you had some concerns.”

Standard 2

“I heard you have some vaccine concerns, but I'd like to get you caught up on vaccines today.”





Motivational Interviewing (MI)?

- Brief MI skills for vaccine conversations
- The spirit of MI:
 - Partnership
 - Acceptance
 - Compassion
 - Evocation





Why use MI with a Vaccine-hesitant Patients?



- MI is effective and efficient.
- What we think will change someone's mind:
 - Persuasion
 - Knowledge and facts
- What actually leads to change:
 - Connecting to a person's values
 - Ambivalence toward change is typical





5 MI Skills to Use in Vaccine Conversations

- **Open Ended Questions**

“Why would you prefer to wait on the MMR vaccine today?”

- **Affirmation**

“It is clear that you want to do what’s best for your health.”

- **Reflection**

“It sounds like you’re most concerned about side effects.”

- **Autonomy Support**

“This is your decision to make. I am here to support you.”

- **Ask Permission to Share**

“Would it be ok if I share with you why I recommend these?”





Exploring Ambivalence

- “I’m wondering, do you see any benefits from vaccination today?”
- It’s ok to hear out negative motivations. Don’t need to refute every statement.
- Look for opportunities to re-focus a conversation
 - On benefits of vaccination
 - Reminding patient of their own positive feelings
 - Promoting change talk
- Always CHECK BACK IN!
“Has anything I shared changed what you would like to do today?”



Breakout Groups!

- Next, we'll move into groups to practice:
 - Presumptive format and MI skills in context
- We will come back together after to discuss





Let's practice!

Patient – Disposition options: accepting of vaccines OR has questions OR is hesitant.

- Think of a recent conversation in your clinic for inspiration
- You may be hesitant because of an internal conflict but you are **not fully resistant**. If the clinician is too directive, not empathetic, your motivation goes down. If the clinician asks open-ended questions, listens and affirms, your motivation goes up.

Clinician – Begin the conversation using the announcement format. Pay attention to the patient's disposition. Use your MI skills to engage the parent.

Observer – Pay close attention to what the clinician says and does. Note any changes in the patient's motivation to accept. Which skills were used?





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Group Debrief: BACK IN LARGE GROUP



Conversation Traps

Lecture or Data Dump

Long recitation of everything you've ever learned about immunology, vaccine safety, autism, and infectious diseases...

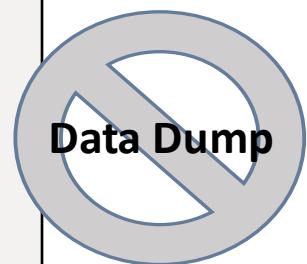


<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ss2hULhXf04>



Sharing Information: Elicit, Provide, Elicit

Elicit	<p>Clinician: Tell me what your concerns are about the influenza vaccine?</p> <p>Patient : <responds with concerns></p>
Provide Information	<p>Clinician: I can tell you're worried about side effects. Can I share some information that you may find helpful?</p> <p>Patient: Sure</p> <p>Clinician: Most people have mild side effects, like a sore arm or feeling achy for a day or two. Serious side effects are very rare. The flu vaccine lowers your risk of severe illness, hospitalization, and missing work or family responsibilities. That's why I recommend it to all of my adult patients each year.</p>
Elicit	<p>Clinician: What's your reaction to that?</p>



Conversation Traps

Persuasion or Whack-a-Mole

Clinician: “So those are all the ways we know this is safe”

Patient: “Yes, but...”

Clinician: “Well here's a bunch more info”

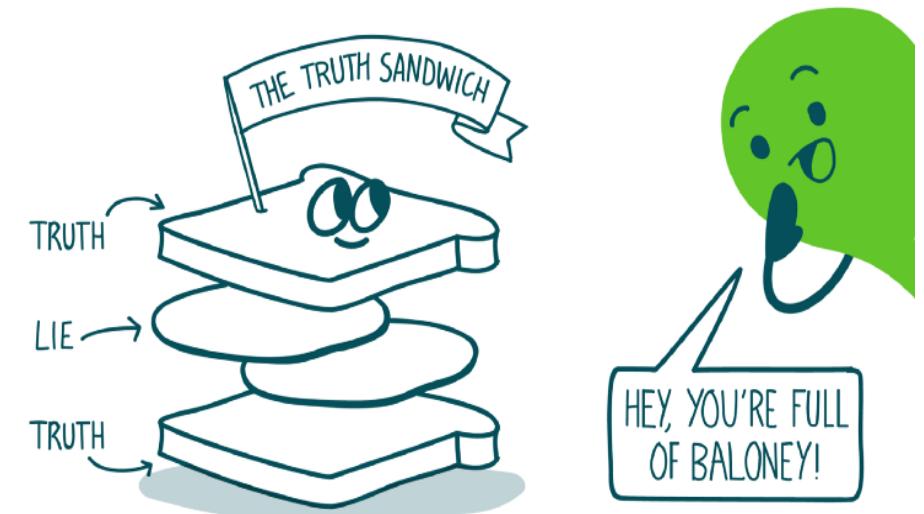
Patient: “Ok, but...”

“Well Actually...”



Challenges: Addressing Myths

- Ask permission to share
- State truth, why myth is false, then repeat the true message that you want them to remember
- If you've never heard the myth before, ask if you can look into it more and get back to them. Then be sure to follow through!



Patient: I don't usually get the flu shot. I'm pretty healthy, and I've heard it can actually make you sick. I'd rather let my immune system handle it.

Myth: The flu vaccine can cause the flu or isn't needed for healthy adults

Clinician: It sounds like you're worried about side effects and whether the flu vaccine is really necessary for you. Would it be okay if I shared what I know?

Reflection
Ask permission to share

Patient: Yeah sure.

Clinician: Most people only have mild side effects from the flu shot, like a sore arm or feeling achy for a day or two.

Truth

A common concern I hear is that the flu vaccine can cause the flu — but it can't.

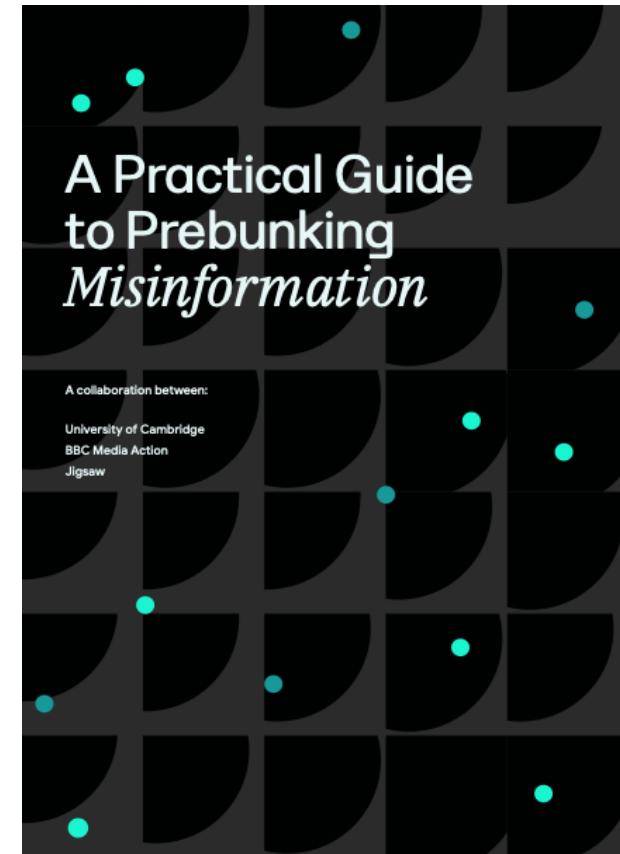
Myth

What it does do is lower your risk of getting seriously ill, being hospitalized, or missing work or family responsibilities, even if you're otherwise healthy. That's why I recommend it every year.

Truth

Inoculating Patients Against Misinformation Tactics

- Just as vaccines build immunity to disease, **psychological inoculation** (“pre-bunking”) builds immunity to misinformation
- Exposes people to common manipulation tactics
- Teaching patients how falsehoods spread helps them **spot and resist misinformation**



[A_Practical_Guide_to_Prebulking_Misinformation.pdf](#)
[Prebulking Manipulation Techniques: Emotional Language \(v2\)](#)



Empower Patients by Highlighting Key Misinformation Strategies

Emotional manipulation:

Exploiting fear, urgency , or outrage to make misinformation more persuasive

Cherry-picking data:

Selecting only data that support a misleading claim while ignoring the broader scientific consensus

Science denial:

Using false experts, conspiracy theories and impossible expectations for certainty in vaccine science.

False dichotomy:

Presenting two options as the only available options, but they're not mutually exclusive

Scapegoating:

Blaming a complex problem on a group or entity that couldn't possibly be responsible for the problem

Ad hominem:

Attacking a person rather than the contents of the argument



Inoculating Patients Against Misinformation Tactics

- **Check the source:** Encourage patients to verify if the information comes from reputable organizations.
- **Cross-check with trusted sites:** If only fringe sources report a claim and major health organizations remain silent, it's likely misinformation. If a claim lacks references, that's a red flag.
- **Follow the money:** Misinformation often is tied to financial motives for people who spread it. This may look like excessive advertising, sensationalized headlines and the promotion of alternatives to vaccination.



Back into Groups!

- Let's move back into groups to practice:
 - Presumptive format and MI skills in context
 - **Myth busting**
- We will come back together after to discuss





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Group Debrief: BACK IN LARGE GROUP



Our Current Moment



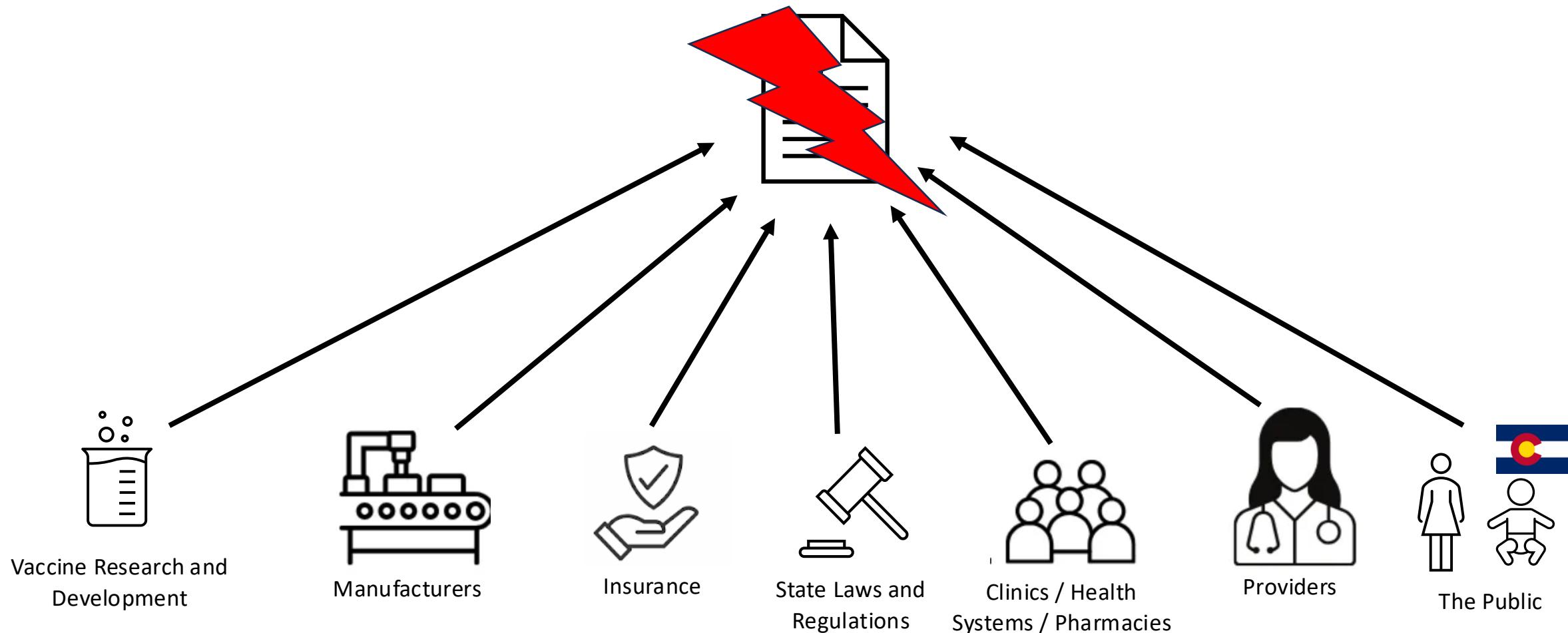
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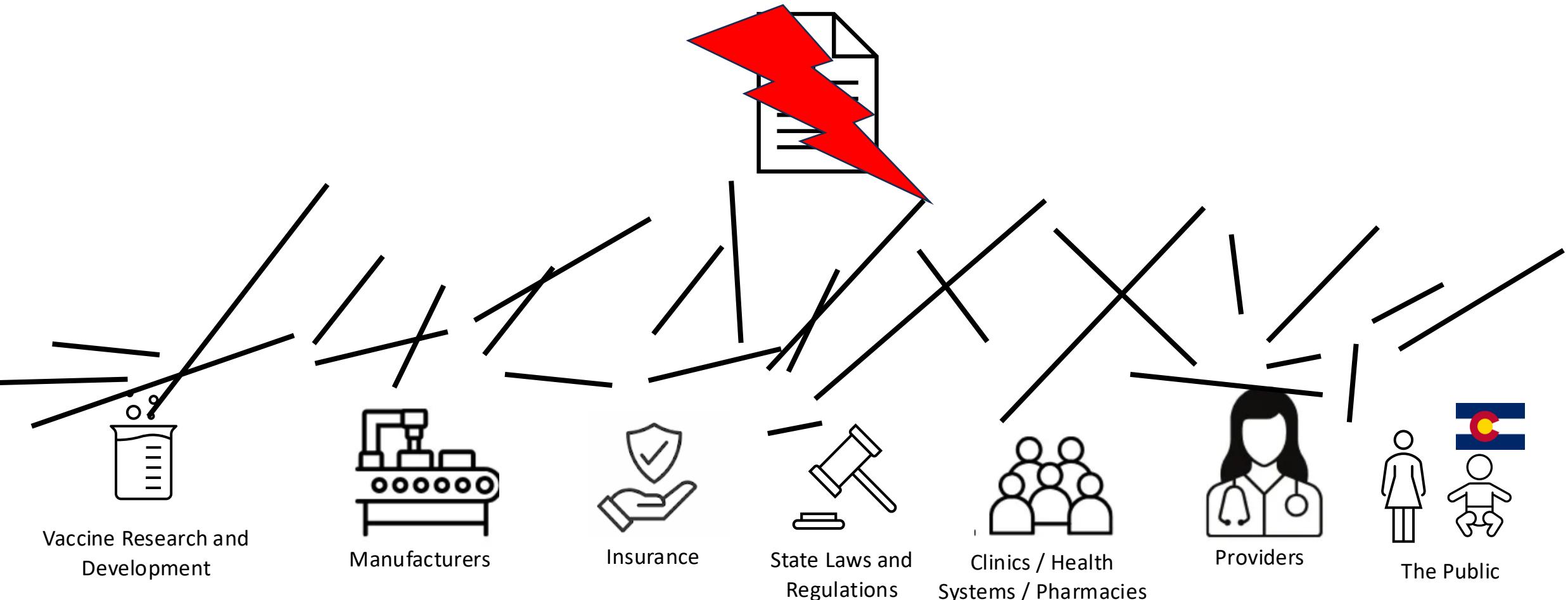


Federal Vaccine Approval, Guidance, and Communication





Federal Vaccine Approval, Guidance, and Communication



Vaccine Research and Development

Manufacturers

Insurance

State Laws and Regulations

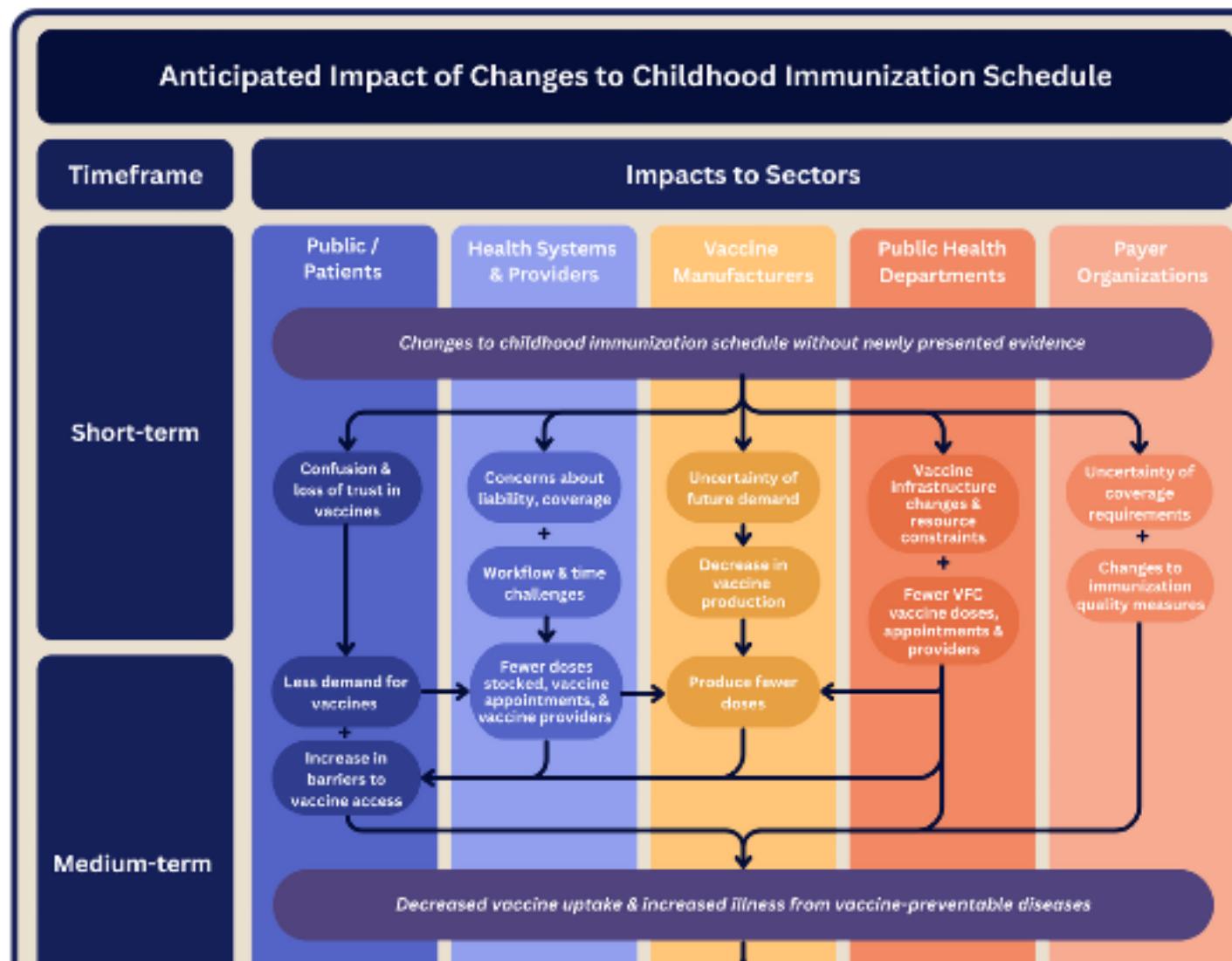
Clinics / Health Systems / Pharmacies

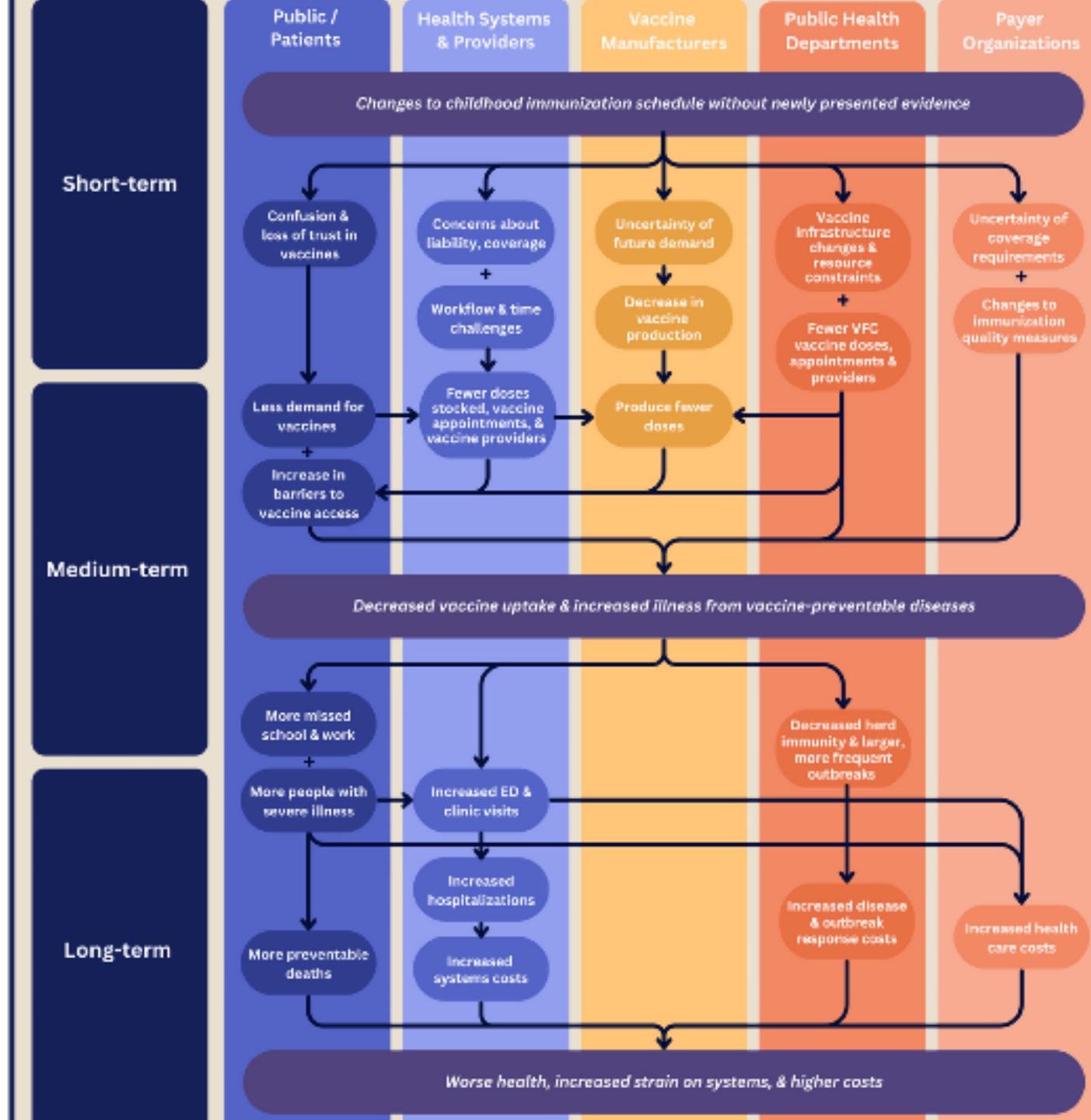
Providers

The Public



This diagram is intended to display possible cascading impacts resulting from changes to the childhood immunization schedule across patients, providers, manufacturers, public health, and payers over time. It is not intended to be specific to any one vaccine or region in the country.





Resources

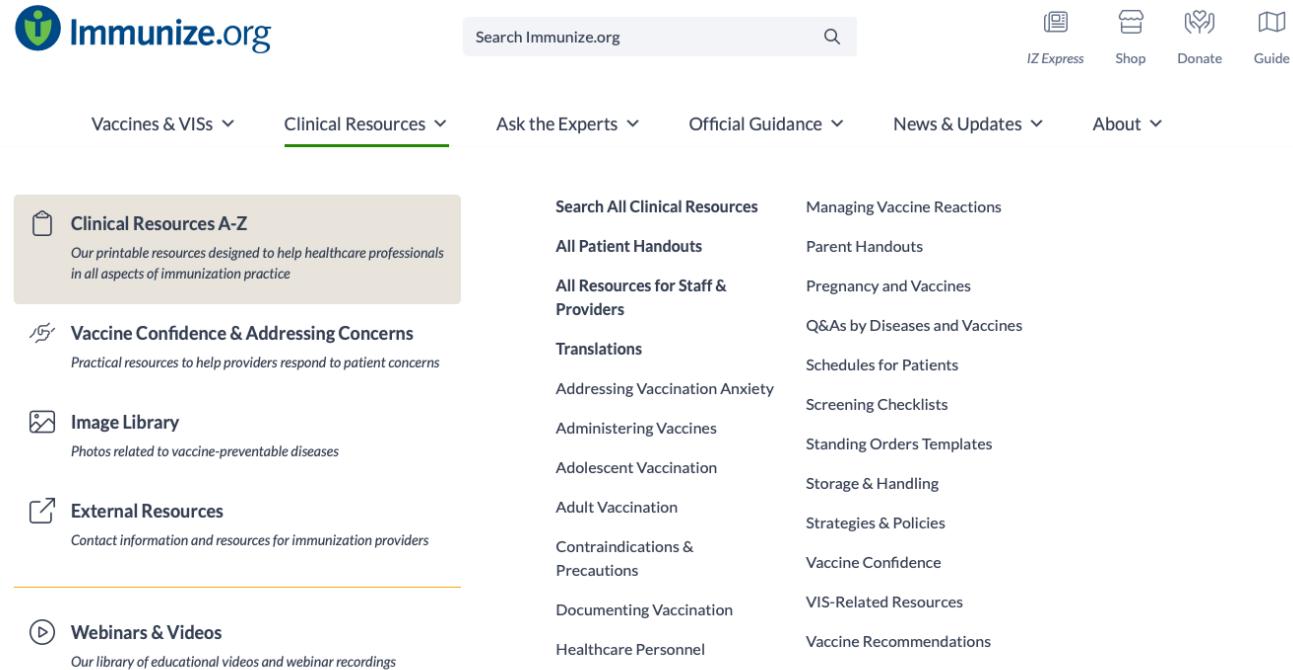


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Immunize.org is a U.S.-based nonprofit dedicated to improving vaccination rates by offering educational materials and practical support to healthcare professionals and the public.





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For parents and people of all ages, we provide **accurate and factual information** about vaccines and the diseases they prevent. Vaccination saves lives!

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People of any age can feel a bit anxious about getting a shot. Some may be so

[VaccineInformation.org](https://www.vaccineinformation.org) is a public-facing resource developed by Immunize.org to provide accurate, accessible, and evidence-based information about vaccines and diseases.



National Foundation for Infectious Diseases

The [National Foundation for Infectious Diseases \(NFID\)](#) offers comprehensive, evidence-based resources on immunization across the lifespan, aiming to educate the public and healthcare professionals about the prevention and treatment of infectious diseases.



The screenshot shows the NFID website's Immunization page. At the top, there is a navigation bar with links for 'Infectious Diseases', 'Immunization' (which is highlighted in yellow), 'Handwashing', and 'Resources', along with a 'Search' button. The main title 'Immunization' is displayed in a large, dark blue font. Below the title, a subtext states: 'NFID offers information, resources, and professional education about vaccines recommended across the lifespan (including children, adolescents, and adults.)'. A horizontal bar with a blue-to-yellow gradient follows. At the bottom of the page, there is a section titled 'What Vaccines Do You Need?' with a 'Children' button below it.



Thank You

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Substack: *Community Immunity* –
communityimmunity.substack.com

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