A Covid-19 Vaccine Problem: People Who Are Afraid to Get One

Many Americans are reluctant or concerned about getting immunized against the coronavirus, including some at high risk of infection.

Safety concerns about a coronavirus vaccine might be arising among the public because of the fast pace of development. In July, a phlebotomist in Atlanta performed blood testing with a patient in a vaccine trial.

PHOTO: JOSHUA RASHAAD MCFADDEN FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

By Jared S. Hopkins
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Scientists and drugmakers are beginning efforts to overcome Americans’ safety and other concerns about Covid-19 vaccines, while U.S. health authorities ready a campaign to encourage widespread uptake.
As vaccine candidates advance closer to U.S. authorization, health and industry officials want to make sure as many people as possible get vaccinated to reach the level, known as herd immunity, that would protect even people who aren’t immunized.

Yet large percentages of Americans, including those at high risk of contracting the virus, are reluctant, skeptical or opposed to taking a vaccine, according to surveys and researchers. Among the reasons: concerns about safety because of the quick development pace and government overreach.

Among those opposed include small but vocal numbers of people who are opposed to all vaccines, which they say are unsafe despite research proving otherwise.

And some Americans, including many who might otherwise support vaccination, express worry the Trump administration will greenlight a vaccine ahead of the November election for political purposes, before the shot is proven to work safely.

Walter Williams, a filmmaker who lives in New Orleans with his wife and 10-year-old son, said he wouldn’t take a vaccine that was approved before the election, out of suspicion it was rushed through development and authorized under pressure.

“We’re going to play it safe with a vaccine,” said Mr. Williams, 66, who said he plans to wait for a vaccine that has broad support from doctors. “I’m not paranoid about vaccination. I’m just paranoid about ones that aren’t properly tested by scientists.”

To tackle the doubts, scientists have been educating community leaders about the benefits of vaccines. An industry-supported group is assembling a network of contacts to send alerts to correct vaccine misinformation when it starts to spread.

The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services plans to launch by November a public-awareness campaign across TV, radio and social media, focusing on vaccine safety, efficacy and hesitancy, the agency said.

The campaign will likely feature medical experts paired with celebrities to help their messages resonate with the public, National Institutes of Health Director Francis Collins said.

“The idea that there would be resistance to what might potentially turn [the pandemic] around seemed a little bit unlikely, but obviously I did not properly understand the groundswell of resistance that is now out there,” Dr. Collins said in an interview.

By naming a key coronavirus-response program Operation Warp Speed, emphasizing speed rather than safety, the federal government might have added to the challenges, experts said. “Maybe there’s an aspect of the Warp Speed brand name that isn’t helping here because it sounds as if that might include some cutting of corners that would increase the likelihood that this vaccine isn’t really safe and isn’t really effective,” Dr. Collins said.

Some public-health experts expressed concerns that the government’s efforts aren’t enough. Given the broad need for vaccination, critics said, the federal government should already have begun raising awareness.
“The response should be done at a massive scale,” said Dr. Saad Omer, director of the Yale Institute for Global Health who studies vaccine hesitancy. “Pandemics have large impacts on the overall population. So communication and intervention efforts should match that impact.”

Health officials say vaccines will be critical to preventing spread of the new coronavirus and allowing life to return to normal. Yet their effectiveness hinges not only on how well they work in an individual but also on how widely they are used.

Many researchers estimate that, depending on how effective the vaccines are, at least half of the U.S. will need to get vaccinated to help provide the herd immunity needed to protect everyone, even those who don’t take a shot.

Health experts worry that vaccination threshold might not be met if concerns deter many people from getting the shots. Some Americans rejected the H1N1 vaccine in 2010, fearing it wasn’t safe despite being tested before distribution, researchers have found.

“You could have the best, most perfect vaccine available, but if no one takes it, then it doesn’t matter,” said Emily Brunson, a medical anthropologist at Texas State University who co-led a group that published a report on recommendations to address hesitancy for the Center for Health Security at Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health.

In the years before the coronavirus pandemic, antivaccination groups spread their messages on social media and found sympathizers among small percentages of Americans, though their assertions were proven false.

Last year, the World Health Organization declared vaccine hesitancy a top-10 global health threat.

According to a Gallup poll published Aug. 7, one in three Americans wouldn’t take a Covid-19 vaccine if it were available free of charge. In a Harris Poll released last week, about 30% of Americans said they were unlikely to take a vaccine, while half said they wouldn't take a vaccine developed outside the U.S.

Kathryn Edwards, scientific director of the Vanderbilt Vaccine Research Program in Nashville, Tenn., said skepticism of coronavirus vaccines goes beyond the hesitancy of small but significant fractions of Americans. People may be especially doubtful out of concern that safety was sacrificed to accelerate the vaccines’ development, Dr. Edwards and other researchers said.

Other factors researchers cited were distrust of government and health-care institutions, triggered by experimentation on Black people decades ago.

Politics is playing a role, too. Democrats would be more likely to take a vaccine than Republicans, according to a new survey from Northeastern, Harvard, Northwestern and Rutgers universities.

“People have to understand the system is really working very hard to do it” with the normal safeguards and without circumventing careful practices, Dr. Edwards said.
The Food and Drug Administration has said any Covid-19 vaccine must be at least 50% more effective than a placebo in preventing the disease, a benchmark used routinely for flu shots. Dr. Edwards and other researchers say awareness and education campaigns should focus on the millions of Americans who aren’t necessarily opposed to vaccines but who aren’t fully supportive either, a middle ground in which many people support some vaccines, or are on the fence. In their meetings with community groups, churches and advocacy activist groups, researchers say misinformation often appears to drive hesitancy to get vaccinated.

Researchers from Cincinnati Children’s Hospital Medical Center who gave an educational presentation at an area church earlier this month faced concerns that vaccines would inject people with the new coronavirus.

The researchers told church members that the vaccine wouldn’t contain the virus itself, but rather a protein designed to generate a protective immune response but that wouldn’t harm them.

“There are a lot of myths, and people don’t get the right information,” said Dr. Lori Crosby, who is leading community outreach for the hospital’s Covid-19 vaccine trials.

The Public Good Projects, which receives funding from the industry group Biotechnology Innovation Organization, plans to alert vaccine supporters to correct misinformation that appears in the news or on social media, Chief Executive Joe Smyser said.

—Peter Loftus contributed to this article.