

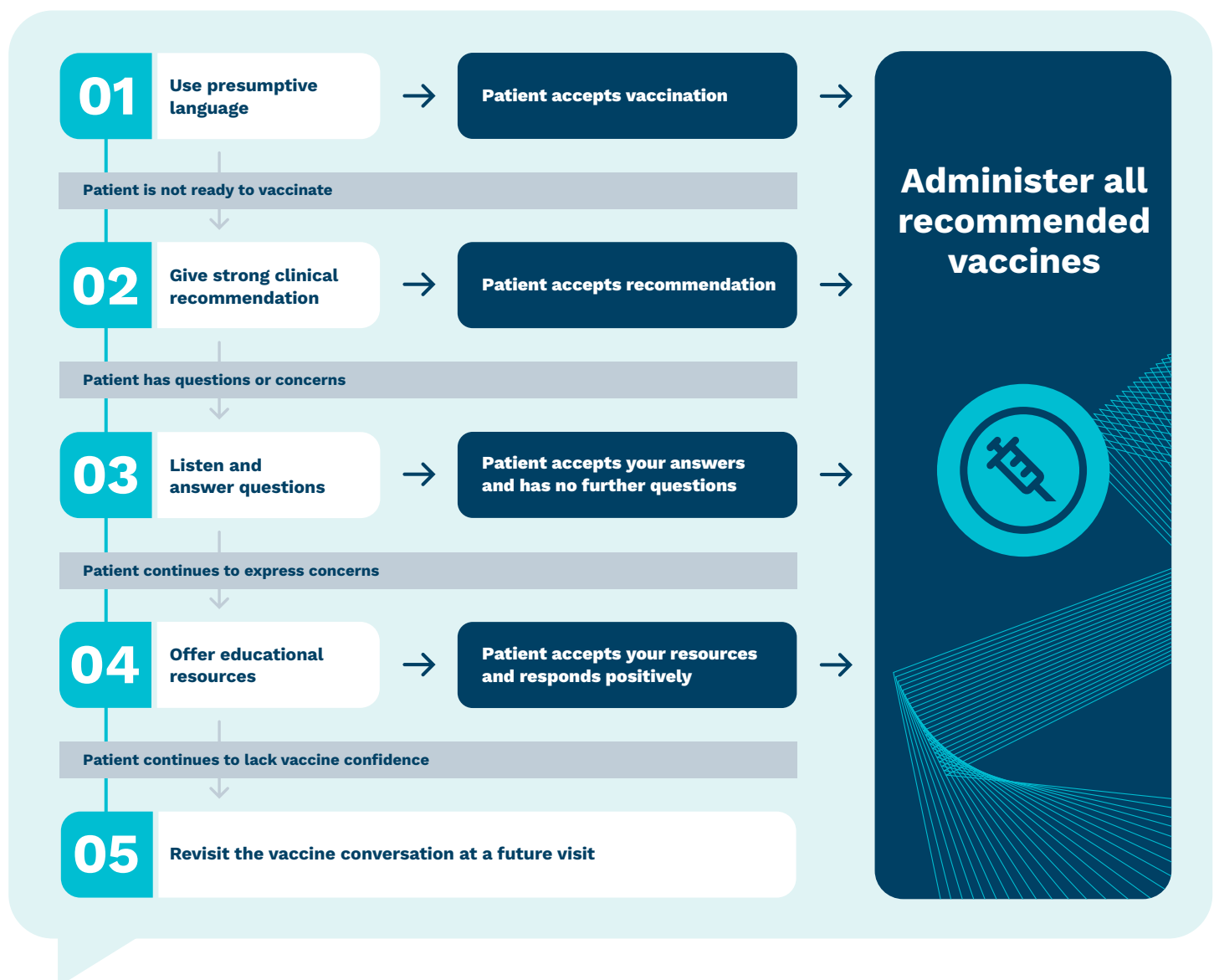


The vaccine conversation: Building confidence, one visit at a time

Practice cultural competency and humility

Patients who have questions about vaccine safety can feel that their concerns were dismissed or not treated with respect by their health care team.¹ Individual experiences, values and beliefs help to shape a patient's confidence about vaccines,² so it is important that you and your care team build trust through culturally competent, respectful conversations. By practicing cultural competency, humility and empathy when addressing vaccine-related concerns, you can improve patients' vaccine literacy and empower them to feel confident in their decision-making.³ To improve visits, consider using a stepwise approach to address vaccine conversations, such as the one in *Figure 1*.

Figure 1. Stepwise approach to vaccine conversations⁴



Additional information below supports this stepwise approach with advice and sample language to use when building patient confidence of vaccines.

- 1. **Use presumptive language.** Use language such as: “Today you are due for the following vaccines, and we will provide those to you before you leave the clinic.” This clearly communicates that vaccines are part of routine preventive care.
- 2. **Give strong clinical recommendation.** Convey your expertise to build confidence with patients about the effectiveness of vaccines with language such as: “Vaccines are one of the safest and most effective ways to protect yourself, your loved ones and your community from serious and preventable diseases.”
- 3. **Listen and answer questions.** When patients express that they lack confidence in vaccines, try using active listening to understand their concerns. Direct, brief motivational interviewing offers an opportunity to elicit information about the patient’s perspective and to provide evidence-based reasons for your vaccine recommendations.
- 4. **Offer educational resources.** Encourage patients to visit FamilyDoctor.org/vaccines if they have any concerns or questions about vaccinations between now and their next visit.
- 5. **Revisit the vaccine conversation at a future visit.** If the patient continues to defer vaccination, note this in their EHR to address it at their next visit.

Table 1. Responding to common barriers to vaccination⁵

Patient concern	Clinician response
“Vaccines make me feel sick afterward, so I prefer to avoid them.”	“I’m sorry to hear that you often feel unwell after receiving a vaccine. That is likely your body learning to protect itself, which is called an immune response. Those symptoms can last one to two days. One option is to try an over-the-counter medication to reduce your symptoms after receiving a vaccine. Also, let’s avoid giving you a vaccine when you can’t afford to feel unwell for a few days.”
“I never get sick, so I don’t feel I need a vaccine today.”	“It’s awesome you rarely get sick. I want to keep you healthy, which is why I recommend this vaccine. At some point, you may have an exposure that makes you, your family or your community sick. Vaccines don’t just keep you safe. They protect those around you as well.”
“I trust my own immune system and feel the immunity after getting sick is better than any vaccine.”	“The human immune system is amazing. That is why I recommend you get this vaccine. Vaccines help your body’s immune system learn to avoid getting sick. The natural illness without the vaccine can sometimes result in serious complications such as a stroke or heart attack. Vaccines help lower that risk.”
“I am concerned about all the additives and preservatives in vaccines.”	“I also want to make sure that we are only putting things into your body that are safe and healthy for you. I stay up to date on the research and tracking of vaccine safety. With that knowledge, I have no concerns for you safely receiving this vaccine.”
“I have a needle phobia.”	“That is a common and very real fear. Let’s explore options to reduce pain and anxiety beforehand. How does that sound?”
“Do we know enough about the long-term harms of this vaccine?”	“Vaccine safety is closely monitored to ensure there aren’t adverse effects or harms to your body. I have confidence this vaccine is safe and effective with no concerns about long-term harms.”

Addressing vaccine misinformation

Resist the urge to disprove misinformation, as it may create conflict. Rather, show respect for the patient without agreeing with their concern, then pivot to offer evidence-based information using brief motivational interviewing.⁶ Often, saying less is more effective when misinformation is shared. Ideally, these conversations occur within a physician-patient relationship built on established trust.

Closing message

If your patient defers a vaccine, note in your EHR the need for a discussion at a future visit. Your ongoing compassionate care and trusted role in your patients' health are your greatest assets and superpowers. Ensure that the door remains open for future conversations, as patients' circumstances or thoughts about receiving a vaccine may change over time.

References

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