The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recommends everyone aged six months and older should be vaccinated against the flu. With COVID-19 vaccines available to Mississippians aged 12 and up, physicians, nurses, and other healthcare providers are essential to a communitywide effort to increase vaccination rates among African Americans in Hancock, Harrison, and Jackson Counties. Less than 40 percent of African Americans receive an annual flu vaccine, and only about one-third of African Americans have taken the COVID-19 vaccine.

Distrust of the healthcare system may be more prevalent among African Americans due to a history of discrimination, past instances of medical experimentation, and lack of representation in healthcare settings. Healthcare providers can help bridge this gap through education and community engagement efforts aimed at increasing vaccination rates.

shea
SHARING HEALTH EDUCATION & AWARENESS

EDUCATE, DON'T DICTATE.

The most important thing to remember is to treat every patient as an adult who has the right and ability to make informed choices about their health. Sharing all of the benefits and any potential risks enables patients to make a decision about how they want to protect themselves and their families. Instead of telling patients what they "should do" or "need to do", you should help them understand how vaccinations will benefit them and their families now and in the future. This process will also help build a deeper relationship with patients built on mutual trust and respect.

EDUCATE YOURSELF.

Take some time to understand some of the current and historical concerns African Americans have with the healthcare system nationally and in your community. In addition to reading articles and reading books, ask other healthcare providers and your patients about some of their experiences that may contribute to mistrust of the healthcare system.

ADDRESS SAFETY CONCERNS.

Patients are getting information and advice about their health from a lot of sources, and most of these sources are not trained healthcare professionals. You should take the time to address conspiracy theories and validate concerns. Addressing these concerns will help build patients' confidence in vaccines and enable them to do additional research on their own to make a decision about whether or not to receive a vaccination.

ASK QUESTIONS.

When patients are hesitant about receiving a vaccination, you should seek to understand the underlying causes of their fear. When you understand what is driving the hesitancy, you are in a better position to offer information that can help to inform their current choice about vaccination.

TRY TO TURN A "NO" INTO A "NOT RIGHT NOW." AND FOLLOW UP.

There is research that shows making a recommendation to vaccinate and offering a vaccination together can increase vaccine uptake. However, sometimes patients need to process all of the information they have received and assess the perceived risk. Rather than applying pressure, encourage patients to think about it if they are not ready to get vaccinated today. If a patient decides not to get a vaccine during an initial appointment, follow up to ask if they have any additional questions and offer to schedule an appointment to get vaccinated in the next few weeks.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention emphasizes the need for healthcare providers to SHARE a strong recommendation to vaccinate. Here are the tips you can follow to help patients make informed decisions about vaccinations:

SHARE the reasons why the influenza vaccine is right for the patient given his or her age, health status, lifestyle, occupation, or other risk factors.

HIGHLIGHT positive experiences with influenza vaccines (personal or in your practice), as appropriate, to reinforce the benefits and strengthen confidence in influenza vaccination.

ADDRESS patient questions and any concerns about the influenza vaccine, including side effects, safety, and vaccine effectiveness in plain and understandable language.

REMIND patients that influenza vaccines protect them and their loved ones from serious influenza illness and influenza-related complications.

EXPLAIN the potential costs of getting influenza, including serious health effects, time lost (such as missing work or family obligations), and financial costs.

Source: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. https://www.cdc.gov/flu/professionals/vaccination/flu-vaccine-recommendation.htm