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Covid-19: Vaccine hesitancy fell after vaccination programme started

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More than eight out of 10 UK adults who were initially reluctant to have a covid vaccine now plan to do so, survey data suggest.

Preliminary findings from University College London's Virus Watch study suggest that 86% of those who were unsure about having the vaccine or planned to refuse it in December 2020 have now changed their minds.¹

The figures are based on online surveys of 36 998 and 38 727 adults in England and Wales, conducted in December 2020 and February 2021, with response rates of 56% and 52%, respectively. Of 14 713 participants who responded to both surveys, 90% said in December they would take up the vaccine.

Among the 10% who said that they either would not do so or were unsure about doing so, 86% (1233 of 1432) had changed their minds by February 2021 and now planned to take up the vaccine, or had already done so. This shift was consistent across all ethnic groups and levels of deprivation measured.

The researchers said that the rise in people intending to take up the vaccine may have been a result of public health messaging or a consequence of individuals seeing the growing numbers of people receiving the vaccine.

Some of the approaches used to help improve uptake were discussed at a Westminster Health Forum policy conference on 24 March. Farzana Hussain, a London GP who has committed to telephoning all the patients at her practice who have yet to take up a vaccine offer, said that personal connections at a local level can help improve uptake. "When my reception staff have called, people have put the phone down, wondering if it's a cold caller," she said. "So we start by saying 'I'm calling on behalf of Dr Hussain.' That personal voice and a connection helps a lot."

Her practice also has set up pop-up clinics in places of worship to help increase uptake. However, she said, "It's not all about where you're providing your clinics, it's about giving people the time and the permission to ask the questions."

Croydon GP Agnelo Fernandes also emphasised the importance of community engagement at a local level. "There's only so much you can do at a borough level or even at a regional or a sector level," he said. "You have to get down among people, right down to one-to-one calls, and that's where we're at at the moment."

Fernandes said that his clinical commissioning group had arranged 14 engagement events through faith groups and influencers in the local community. "Not forcing it down people's throats but giving people the information so that they can make informed choices," he said. "One of the things that was coming back to us was that people felt they were being put upon and that the information was rammed down them. It's actually trying to give them the information to make informed choices."

¹ Byrne T, Patel P, Shrotri M, et al. Trends, patterns, and psychological influences on covid-19 vaccination intention: findings from a large prospective community cohort study in England and Wales. *Virus Watch*. March 2021. <https://ucl-virus-watch.net/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/Trends-patterns-and-psychological-influences-on-COVID-19-vaccination-intention-findings-from-a-large-prospective-community-cohort-study-in-England-and-Wales-Virus-Watch.pdf>.

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