

COVID-19 Facts and Guidance for Faith and Community Leaders

According to a recent survey released by the American Psychiatric Association, many people have significant anxiety and concerns related to Coronavirus disease. The study indicates that one in four people who seek help for mental health concerns turn to faith leaders before seeking help from clinical professionals.

Below is information to help faith and community leaders understand and support their communities.

What is COVID-19?

COVID-19 is a disease caused by the SARS-CoV-2 virus, also known as Coronavirus.

How is COVID-19 transmitted?

COVID-19 is spread in three main ways:

1. When you are breathing in air close to an infected person exhaling droplets and particles that contain the virus.
2. When these droplets and particles land on the eyes, nose, or mouth from a cough or sneeze.
3. When touching eyes, nose, or mouth with hands that have the virus on them.

What's the concern with the COVID-19 strains?

The Coronavirus that causes COVID-19 has gone through a changing process many times during the pandemic. Researchers have evidence that:

- **Some new strains may enable the Coronavirus to spread faster from person to person.**
- **More infections can result in more people getting very sick or dying.**
- **New strains of the virus will continue to spread.**
- **The most significant risk of transmission is among communities with low vaccination rates.**

Therefore, vaccines are the most effective way to control and treat the virus, including the new strains.

How do COVID-19 vaccines work?

The vaccines teach your immune system how to recognize and fight the virus that causes COVID-19. The vaccines never enter where your DNA is stored. Therefore, they do not change or interact with your DNA in any way. The vaccines do not contain the live virus that causes COVID-19. So, they cannot make you sick with it.

If you experience side effects after getting the vaccine, such as feeling tired, fever, chills, etcetera, these are temporary and mean your body is learning how to fight the virus.



What are some temporary effects of being vaccinated?

The benefits of COVID-19 vaccination outweigh the known and potential risks. Serious side effects that could cause long-term health problems are highly unusual following any vaccination, including COVID-19. In rare cases, people have experienced the following four severe types of adverse events following COVID-19 vaccination:

1. **Anaphylaxis**
2. **Thrombosis with thrombocytopenia syndrome (TTS)**
3. **Myocarditis and pericarditis**
4. **Guillain-Barré Syndrome (GBS)**

What are the benefits of being vaccinated?

Although the vaccine is not 100% effective and breakthrough cases are possible, vaccines help reduce the spread of the virus to your family and friends and effectively prevent hospitalization and death.

- COVID-19 vaccines build protection.
- People who are fully vaccinated and boosted can experience breakthrough infections and symptoms but for a shorter time. Their chances of contracting a severe illness remain far lower than unvaccinated people.
- Vaccinated people have a lower overall risk of contracting COVID-19, needing hospitalization, and dying than people who have not received the vaccine. Since no vaccination is 100% effective, vaccinated individuals are still susceptible to “breakthrough infections” like COVID-19, but those result in a mild sickness or no symptoms at all.
- By being vaccinated, you help ensure that those with serious illnesses other than Coronavirus disease can get the care they need because hospitals won’t be overwhelmed with treating COVID-19 patients.

Testing:

COVID-19 testing is free, quick, and effective. You should get tested if you:

- Have COVID-19 symptoms.
- Know or suspect that you or a loved one has been exposed to COVID-19.
- Are traveling.
- Are asked by a healthcare professional or public health official.

COVID-19 tests are available at no cost nationwide at health centers and select pharmacies.

How can we protect our loved ones and prevent COVID-19?

Getting vaccinated and following safety protocols like the use of masks, social distance, and washing your hands with soap and water is the best way to protect yourself and those you love. You can also follow the following steps:

- **Assess:** Evaluate the barriers that your community is facing and what they need to get vaccinated, tested, or juggle the challenges of homeschooling children, work, and caring for other family members. Connect with your local Alderman and community-based organizations to get members the identified resources needed.
- **Ask:** Reach out to members of your congregation that have the expertise or medical background to address the community and provide direction, evidence-based information, and resources.
- **Act:** Arrange for volunteers to assist members of your community who might need help securing online vaccination/testing appointments and/or transportation to and from these appointments. Keep updated regarding the latest recommendations around COVID-19 as these are constantly changing.
- **Advocate:** Encourage community members to voice their concerns for the most vulnerable, to speak up, to be the change they want to see, and to become champions of health for their communities.

How can you come alongside those who struggle with self-care and emotional distress due to COVID-19?

You can gracefully and lovingly come alongside those in your community who are facing emotional distress and mental illness. However, it is essential to refer people to professional help when they:

- Display noticeable changes in behavior.
- Show signs of violence and abuse. In this case, request a wellness check visit by local authorities.
- Seem overwhelmed with emotions like sadness, depression, or anxiety, or could harm themselves or others. Call 911 or emergency professionals.

Resources

- Vaccine hesitancy resource: <https://health.clevelandclinic.org/breakthrough-covid-cases/>
- Where to get tested <https://dph.illinois.gov/covid19/testing.html>
- Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration’s (SAMHSA) National Suicide Prevention Lifeline 1-800-273-TALK helpline.
- Disaster Distress Helpline at 800-985-5990 or text “Talitha’s” to 66746.
- Black Faith Community Toolkit <https://blackfaithvaccinetoolkit.org/>
- Hispanic Faith Community Toolkit <https://hispanicfaithvaccinetoolkit.org/>