

# Coping with COVID-19 Vaccine Stress

Since early 2020, we have faced much uncertainty and many challenges while navigating new frontiers of change during a global pandemic. So many things look different, so many things feel different, and so many things are different. After facing months of things that are different, we now face decisions about COVID-19 vaccinations and that may result in anxiousness, stress, or other reactions.

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One helpful strategy for managing stress or anxiety about the COVID-19 vaccine is to identify what we know and what we can do. Things you can do may include:

- **Do your research.** Fear is often based in the unknown, so learn as much as you can. Consider what is worrying you. Are you concerned about possible side effects, how recommendation decisions are being made, or about how the vaccine works? Once you identify your specific thoughts and concerns, you can search for information that addresses the questions you may have and keep yourself informed. The CDC's COVID-19 Vaccines page ([www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/vaccines](http://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/vaccines)) is a great place to start.
- **Stay up to date.** Keep yourself in the loop as progress is made with vaccines and vaccine distribution. Be careful not to get sucked into consuming too much news or social media – stick to a vetted vaccine tracker and allow yourself to take a break from news if it becomes overwhelming or intrusive to your daily routines.
- **Look towards officials you trust.** The State of New Hampshire's webpage ([www.nh.gov/covid19](http://www.nh.gov/covid19)) is a helpful resource. Other trusted sources regarding vaccine safety may include Dr. Anthony Fauci (Director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases) or the Food and Drug Administration (FDA). The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and World Health Organization (WHO) are also reputable sources. It may also be helpful to find information from multiple trusted sources.
- **Think about the benefits compared to the risks.** We don't know everything about the new vaccines, but so far leading trials have been safe. Under an Emergency Use Authorization (EUA), known and potential benefits must outweigh the known and potential risks before a vaccine will be approved for use. Health and medical experts believe getting the vaccine will help you develop immunity to the virus that causes COVID-19 and help keep you and your family safe.
- **Make decisions in your best interest.** If your anxiety about vaccination is overwhelming, intrusive, or too much to cope with, it may be helpful to communicate with your primary care provider or a mental health professional. Communicating with a physician or a therapist may help you identify your specific concerns and may help you develop strategies for managing what you're experiencing.

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Another helpful strategy is to know what to expect, which helps to reduce uncertainty. It may be helpful to remind yourself of possible side effects and how to manage any side effects that may occur.

- **Common side effects** may include pain or swelling at the injection site, fever, chills, tiredness, or headache.
- **Helpful tips** for managing pain, discomfort, or other side effects include putting a clean, cool, wet washcloth over the injection site; using or exercising your arm; drinking plenty of fluids; and dressing lightly in comfortable clothing.
- **Remind yourself** that side effects may feel like flu and even affect your ability to do daily activities, but they should go away in a few days. It may be helpful to contact your physician if redness or tenderness of the injection site increases after 24 hours or if your side effects are worrying and don't go away within a few days.



# Coping with COVID-19 Vaccine Stress

Experiencing any prolonged stressor, such as all the change that comes with COVID-19, results in cumulative stress – stress that collects day after day because information about the pandemic is all around us all the time. While it may be reasonable to presume that everyone understands and can recognize stress, it is also true that we may be unprepared for our own stress responses. We may not even recognize stress reactions or anxiety when we experience them. It may be helpful to remember that stress may impact us in different ways. It may also be helpful to remember that once it is recognized, stress must be triaged and treated if we hope to be resilient and adaptable to what is happening around us.

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A third strategy for managing stress or anxiety about COVID-19 or the vaccine is to practice recognizing how you experience stress. Stress reactions may include:

- **Changes in your behavior** such as an increase or decrease in your energy and activity levels; an increase in irritability, outbursts of anger, or frequent arguing; having trouble relaxing or sleeping; wanting to be alone most of the time; worrying excessively or more often than not; having difficulty communicating or listening; inability to feel pleasure or have fun; or an increase in your use of alcohol, tobacco, or other substances
- **Physical reactions** such as having headaches and other pains, losing your appetite or eating too much, sweating or having chills, being easily startled, having stomachaches or diarrhea, or worsening of previous medical or mental health conditions
- **Emotional reactions** such as feeling depressed; being anxious or fearful; feeling angry, overwhelmed, or guilty; or having difficulty caring about anything
- **Changes in your thinking** such as having trouble remembering things, feeling confused, having trouble thinking clearly and concentrating, or having difficulty making decisions

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Another strategy for managing cumulative stress or anxiety about COVID-19 or the vaccine is to purposefully practice stress management and self-care. Ways to practice stress management for your health may include:

- **Know your personal signs of stress.** Include others in your stress control plan; they can tip you off when they recognize your stress signs and you can help them recognize their stress signs as well.
- **Identify major stressors** and develop a plan for how you will address your stress when it happens.
- **Create a community culture** or buddy system for exercising, relaxing, or talking together.
- **Take time for yourself.** Mentally disconnect from distressing information as completely as possible – limit exposure to media or conversations related to COVID-19 when possible or as needed.
- **Choose constructive ways to release stress** such as walking, stretching, deep breathing, reading, listening to music, etc.
- **Practice healthy sleep behaviors.** Train your body to downshift by getting into a routine sleep pattern.
- **Try to avoid foods that are high in sugar,** carbohydrates, caffeine, and alcohol, which can all trap stress chemicals in muscle tissues and leave you with flu-like symptoms (achy, fatigued, nauseous, dehydrated, etc.).
- **Communicate with others** about your reactions, emotions, and stress. Keeping things in or stuffing down what you're experiencing might feel helpful in the short term, yet it's likely to result in more intense stress reactions. Acknowledging your stress by communicating with others or with professionals (like a counselor) creates opportunities for managing stress more effectively.