

Successful Communication with People with Disabilities

Federal law requires covered entities—like COVID-19 vaccination sites and other medical facilities—to ensure their staff communicate effectively with people with disabilities. There are many types of disabilities—some visible, some invisible—and each individual person has their own unique needs and preferences. The best thing to do is ask a person how you can support them during the process. Below are tips and guidelines to help you communicate effectively.

Steps for Success

- 1. Introduce yourself.** If the person has a intellectual or developmental disability, say, “Hello, my name is _____. I am going to give you a quick shot to help your body learn how to protect you from COVID. I’m a (name your job). I look different from the picture on my badge because (I’m wearing PPE to stay healthy, keep others safe, etc.).”
- 2. Explain the situation.** Clearly and simply explain how you will give them the COVID-19 vaccine, and why it is important. Explain when they will need a second shot (if applicable) and how long it will take to develop full immunity. Let them know they may have a sore arm or feel kind of achy, and that its completely normal.
- 3. Ask about preferences.** Ask if the person has any requests for how you give them the shot. Do they need help with anything?
- 4. Get permission.** Ask for permission before you administer the shot.

General Tips for Success

Clarity. Keep your directions clear and simple. Speak slowly and explain when the process will be over. Avoid phrases that have more than one meaning, like “this line is flying by,” as these can be confusing for some people.

Patience. Be patient and repeat instructions or questions multiple times if you need to.

Listen. Give people time to talk and don’t be afraid to ask for clarification if you need it. If you don’t understand what someone is saying, try asking “yes” or “no” questions.

Respect. Talk to the person first, not the companion or attendant, unless requested. For example, if someone is using an American Sign Language (ASL) interpreter, look at the person and not the interpreter.

Tone. Remember, people meet the emotional tone you set, so smile, stay calm, and be friendly.



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Tips for Specific Situations



If a person has a **mobility impairment**, ask if they would like any assistance.



If a person has a **vision impairment**, ask if they would like your assistance. If so, offer your arm above the elbow. Offer assistance in completing any forms.



If a person has a **service animal**, don't pet or interact with the animal.

Intellectual Disabilities & Autism

Time. Give extra time for the person to process what you are saying and to respond.

Simple. Use short words and sentences and provide accurate, honest information. Sometimes pictures and objects can help to illustrate your words—point to your ID picture as you say who you are and point to any protective equipment as you speak about it.

Reassure. Repeat reassurances. For example, "You may feel afraid. That's ok. We're going to give you this shot to help your body learn how to protect you from COVID."

Social. Sometimes people may behave differently than you expect. They may look at you at an odd angle, laugh or giggle inappropriately, or not seem to take the situation seriously. Don't interpret these behaviors as deceit or disrespect.

Deaf or Hard of Hearing

Establish **eye contact** with the person, not the interpreter.

Offer **pencil and paper**, write slowly, and let the individual read as you write. Keep instructions simple and in the present tense.

Some people who are Deaf or hard of hearing communicate using ASL. You may need to have a **qualified interpreter** on site.

If you **can't get an interpreter**, you can use Video Remote Interpreting (VRI). Think of it like using FaceTime or Skype to access an interpreter. Scan the QR code to connect to VRI operated by FEMA.



For more information, you can check out the Project REDD "Tips for First Responders" developed by Texas A&M: <http://disabilitytips.tamu.edu/>

