

# COVID-19 & Vaccine Confidence in the United States

## Vaccination in the Era of COVID-19

As COVID-19 continues to afflict individuals, families, and communities across the country, there is newfound attention on the importance of vaccines as a preventive health measure.<sup>1</sup> Ensuring that Americans remain confident in vaccines, throughout the pandemic and beyond, will help protect against illness and save lives.<sup>2</sup>

Vaccination is widely considered one of the greatest public health achievements of the twenty-first century.<sup>3</sup> Among children born between 1994-2018, vaccination will help prevent an estimated 419 million illnesses, 8 million hospitalizations, and 936,000 deaths over their lifetimes.<sup>4</sup> The COVID-19 pandemic has the potential to offset historically high vaccination coverage rates across certain populations.<sup>5</sup> Ensuring vaccination services are reinitiated, maintained, and strengthened is essential to help protect individuals and communities from vaccine-preventable diseases.<sup>6</sup>

## Building Confidence in Vaccination

The return to a “new normal,” the protection of public health, and the recovery of our economy hinge largely upon the development and widespread distribution of safe and effective COVID-19 vaccines.<sup>7,8</sup> But having quality vaccines is only part of the solution; acceptance of these vaccines is also critical.



**Vaccine hesitancy**—the reluctance or refusal to vaccinate despite the availability of vaccines—threatens to reverse progress made in tackling vaccine-preventable diseases around the world, including in the US.<sup>9,10</sup>

As with other vaccines, vaccine hesitancy can be expected to persist and may be exacerbated by public distrust of science, government, media, businesses, and the continued rapid spread of misinformation on social media platforms.

Building confidence in vaccination—that is, improving trust in vaccines and the systems that administer them—is essential for overcoming vaccine hesitancy and increasing acceptance of vaccines.<sup>11,12</sup> This is particularly the case for the recovery of routine vaccination rates, which have been disrupted by COVID-19.<sup>12,13</sup> Restrictions on travel and fear of COVID-19 infection, among other challenges, have made it difficult to sustain routine vaccination coverage rates across the US during the pandemic.<sup>14,15,16</sup> As a result of the pandemic, estimates suggest that children in the US were on track to miss 9 million vaccine doses by the end of 2020—a decrease of up to 26 percent between January-September 2020 compared to 2019.<sup>17</sup>



*In a recent US poll, only 71 percent of respondents indicated that they would or probably would receive a COVID-19 vaccine, and 27 percent of respondents said they would not or probably would not get vaccinated.<sup>18</sup>*



Decreases in vaccination across the life-course could lead to future outbreaks and risk the health and well-being of families across the country.<sup>6</sup> This could further compound inequities in health care laid bare by the pandemic, which is disproportionately affecting Black, Indigenous, Latino, and other people of color.<sup>19,20</sup> Across the US, Black Americans are dying from COVID-19 at 1.5 times the rate of their White counterparts.<sup>20</sup> These trends reflect broader inequities in the social determinants of health, such as poverty and health care access.<sup>21</sup> Similarly, there are significant disparities by type of insurance. For example, the number of routine well-visits by patients with Medicare and commercial insurance have rebounded to within 10 percent of baseline rates that were seen prior to the pandemic, while those with Medicaid remain 20 percent lower than baseline.<sup>22</sup>



*The number of vaccine doses given to children ages 0-18 declined by more than 40 percent from April 2019 to April 2020 in California and by 56 percent in Maryland.<sup>27,28</sup>*

The COVID-19 pandemic is a stark reminder of the critical role that vaccination plays in helping protect our society from disease outbreaks, and it underscores the need to improve vaccination program resilience.<sup>14,23</sup> Resilient vaccination programs are those that can withstand major shocks and disruptions, quickly adapt to changing circumstances, and maintain high vaccine uptake and acceptance over time.<sup>24</sup> Building more resilient programs is key to helping communities prevent, manage, and recover from challenges and crises such as COVID-19.<sup>25</sup> The current pandemic offers important opportunities to strengthen the resolve to develop and use vaccines to prevent disease.<sup>26</sup>

Improving confidence in vaccination, strengthening vaccine services, and building vaccination program resilience is critical for protecting individuals and communities from vaccine-preventable diseases.<sup>3,29,30</sup>

## Merck's Commitment

Merck has been fully committed to developing an effective response to the COVID-19 pandemic since it was first recognized, and we know that success will require global collaboration among countries, companies, and more. As has been the case with many diseases, we are optimistic that our industry's efforts will create new tools to address the pandemic and that the unprecedented collaboration we are seeing today will accelerate these efforts. We remain steadfast in our efforts to build and strengthen vaccine confidence.

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