

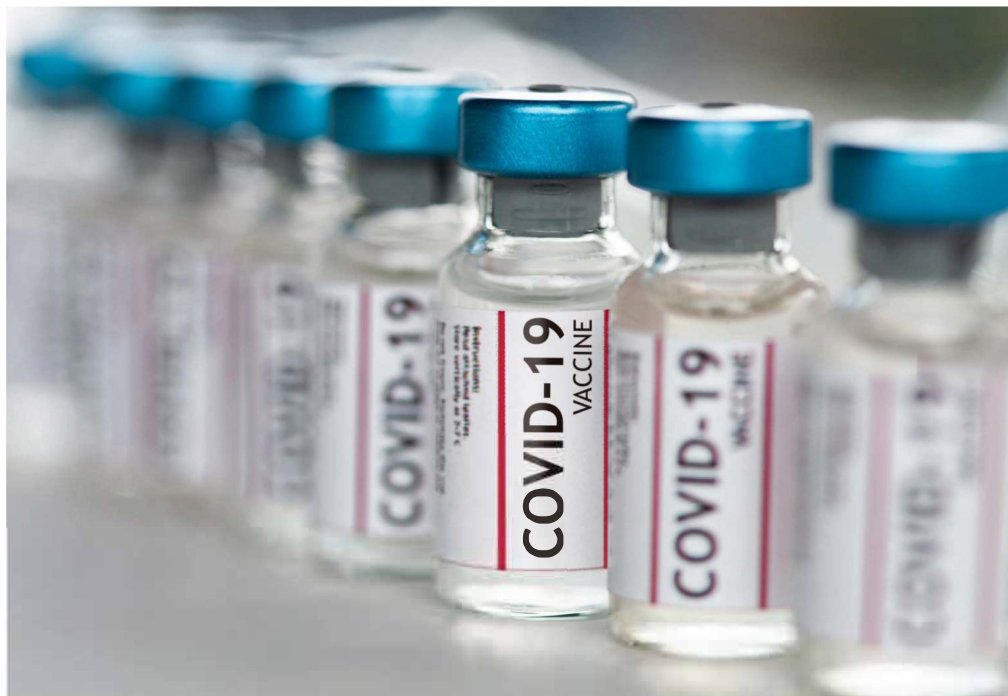
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## COVID vaccine etiquette: What's OK to ask — at home, work and beyond

As more people receive the coronavirus vaccine and begin to gather, etiquette experts are offering guidance on how to navigate uncomfortable questions



Covid-19 Coronavirus Vaccine vials in a row. (iStock)

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If you get an invitation to a dinner party, is it OK to ask whether the other guests have been vaccinated? If you're told to return to the office, is it appropriate to ask your cubicle mate whether they've gotten a shot? Should you feel obligated to answer such questions if you're on the receiving end?

When the coronavirus hit California, the message was pretty clear: don't gather. Now, with more people receiving a vaccine and case numbers falling, many families, friends and coworkers are getting together for the first time in a year, raising some thorny questions that leave us trying to strike a balance between ensuring our personal safety and preserving relationships in this new normal.



"It's everywhere. Even in my own personal life, these questions have popped up," said Syndi Seid, owner of Bay Area-based Advanced Etiquette, who has advised companies, colleges and individuals on how to navigate everything from corporate events to weddings.

It is acceptable to inquire about someone's vaccination status with genuine interest in a respectful way, Seid said, particularly when your own health is at stake. You might try sharing that you struggled to find an appointment and inquire whether they've been able to find an open slot, for instance, rather than bluntly demanding to know whether they've gotten a shot.

Regardless, she says, be mindful of how you respond to what they say.

Consider the cubicle mate. Suppose she's decided not to get the vaccine. Seid suggests employing something called the sandwich technique to respond — putting the meat of your response between two positive or agreeable points. You might say to your colleague: I can respect your opinion, however, I do believe in the vaccine. For the rest of the year, I don't want to be in the company of anyone who has not been vaccinated. Please don't take it personally, but I'll request to be put in another cubicle for the duration of this pandemic. I'd love to come back because I've really enjoyed working with you.

That technique may also be helpful if you don't want to answer a question about your own vaccination status, Seid said, with a response such as, "I know that's a normal question a lot of people are asking, however, it's not something I personally feel very comfortable answering. I hope you understand."

That may work in some social settings, but there are situations where a more straightforward response is warranted, even mandated, said Charles Binkley, director of bioethics at the Markkula Center for Applied Ethics at Santa Clara University. He recently co-authored a [magazine piece](#) arguing that churches should require congregants to be inoculated, writing that "churches have an ethical obligation to protect the health of clergy, staff and worshipers. ... It is morally irresponsible for churches to invite people to worship and receive the sacraments without taking all effective steps to minimize the risk."

Binkley thinks the same rule could apply to the airline industry, noting that "there's no ethical obligation to fly someone," should they decline the vaccine. And companies will be able to [require employees](#) to get the vaccine. But, he thinks, companies mandating vaccination should use termination as a last resort for employees who refuse to get a shot.

"You try to figure out if there are workarounds," he said, like allowing the employee to work from home. Some employees, he said, may have legitimate medical reasons for turning down the vaccine.

Lisa Grotts, an etiquette expert known as the "Golden Rules Gal," thinks that rule — treat others as you want to be treated — is paramount, even in uncertain times.

“When life came to a screeching halt a year ago, it’s no surprise that the golden rule moved to the head of the line,” she said. “It was important to treat others the way we wanted to be treated: wear a mask, keep our distance and get vaccinated. The new normal is evolving with endless uncertainty. With COVID, we are still learning to adapt to change as new rules take root.”

But, Grotts said, people who opt out of getting a shot stand to be left behind when it comes to social interactions, international trips and more — and that’s ultimately on them.

“How will vaxxers versus anti-vaxxers interact with one another when we’ve all had our turn?” Grotts said. “From my perspective, the burden is on those who have not been vaccinated.”

As pandemic restrictions ease and more people begin to gather, it’s up to those in leadership roles to be as clear as possible, said Shashi Dosaj, founder of the California Institute of Etiquette. No making assumptions about how people will behave or leaving them in the dark.

“(Human resources) or the employer should be very transparent about policy,” Dosaj said.

Likewise, at bigger social gatherings, like weddings, it’s polite for the host to spell out what’s expected.

“I think the host has a responsibility to let the invited guests know the protocol,” Dosaj said. “They can at least let guests know that people will be wearing masks, so please wear a mask. Just like a dress code. I think that can alleviate a lot of tension.”

Still, comfort levels are going to vary. Dosaj, who has not hugged her grandchildren during the pandemic, recently told a good friend who is a known hugger ahead of a small outdoor party that she wasn’t comfortable embracing even after being vaccinated. The friend was understanding.

“You are in charge. Nobody is forcing you,” she said. “The bottom line to all of this is we need to be respectful.”

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## Emily DeRuy | Reporter

Emily DeRuy covers the coronavirus pandemic and politics for the Bay Area News Group. Prior to that, she covered housing and the city of San Jose. Earlier in her career she wrote about education for The Atlantic in Washington, D.C.