



## Vaccine Attitudes Focus Groups: Political Affiliation Cohort

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The [Utah Health and Economic Recovery Outreach \(HERO\) Project](#) began in May 2020 as a collaborative statewide testing and analysis project to understand the community-based spread of Covid-19. The goal of the HERO Project is to collect and utilize high-quality local data to help inform decision-makers seeking to guide Utah's citizens and economy through a safe return to normalcy. One year later, the project team is wrapping up its reporting on community testing, impacts of Covid-19 on Utah businesses and consumers, school testing, and vaccine uptake, impact, and implications. This report summarizes and synthesizes focus groups related to vaccines. More information on the HERO Project's past and current work can be found in the project's [previous reporting](#).

Sixteen residents who were identified based on a political affiliation participated in two focus groups, each with eight people, lasting a little over an hour. Researchers from the University of Utah Department of Internal Medicine's Qualitative Research Core worked on behalf of the HERO Project team to identify key themes from the focus group discussions, which formed the foundation for this report.

### Key Takeaways

Participants described varying degrees of impact from Covid-19 and the pandemic, and had equally broad thoughts on the Covid-19 vaccine. Out of the sixteen participants, four were fully vaccinated, three had received one dose, and the rest were unvaccinated.

### Experience with Covid-19

- Those who felt little impact said their everyday lives did not change greatly, but changed mainly through having travel plans canceled and wearing masks. Others felt a greater impact in their everyday life, affecting their work schedule, social interactions, children's fears, and isolation.
- Many participants felt a high likelihood of being exposed to Covid-19 due to family members or work. Some had contracted the virus and did not feel the need to be overly cautious afterwards, while others didn't worry about contracting it, or felt the need to, so they could "get it over with."

### Vaccine Attitudes

- Many participants remained uncertain if they would get the Covid-19 vaccine. Various reasons for not receiving the vaccine included wanting more research and information, fear of blood clots, feeling their antibodies/immune system was enough, not excessively caring about contracting Covid-19, and displeasure in being told by the government that they should get vaccinated.
- While generally having a positive attitude toward other vaccines, some participants remain concerned about the Covid-19 vaccines, often mentioning the fear of adverse reactions. Participants cited several benefits of the vaccine as well, including the return to normal, travel, feeling safer, and not passing it on to others.
- Some participants disliked how "pushy" they felt the government was to get vaccinated, and others discussed their dislike of being shamed for not receiving the vaccine.
- Participants mentioned receiving information from the Utah Department of Health, doctors, hospital systems, and news and media. Many said they do not trust the state or anything political for sources of information, but trust their doctors, church leaders, and family.

## Covid-19 Impacts and Likelihood of Exposure

Participants in this cohort were asked questions regarding the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on their lives and their feelings about their likelihood of exposure. Some experience little impact, while others suffered job losses and mental health issues.

*"just mostly limited where we've gone. It's just shrunk our world down to the small bubble that we've encased ourself in."*

Many participants felt they had a high likelihood of being exposed to Covid because of people they lived or worked with. Some were not worried about contracting the virus and one participant compared contracting Covid-19 on purpose to when they were a child and sent to another's house to contract chickenpox so they could get it over with. In addition, some participants also discussed different times when they knew they were exposed to the virus but never became ill with it themselves. In particular, one participant said their husband and their co-workers contracted Covid, but they never got it.

*"So my spouse got Covid and I could not get it, no matter what. I stayed in the same rooms. And so I don't know if- and then like I said, where I work, people that had Covid almost every day and I didn't get it. Supposedly I'm immune to it with some blood type, but they say that that's not true either, so. But I did try."*

## Vaccine Attitudes

Almost all participants did not have problems with vaccines, with many saying they are safe and effective. Some participants with children said they usually vaccinate their kids. Participants discussed vaccine reactions and their experiences in the past with adverse reactions, causing some hesitation to get the Covid-19 vaccine.

*"I also don't have a problem with any vaccines. But I do a lot of research...but I feel like you can find either side on almost any case. You can find the good and the bad out there by an expert. So I think it's hard to filter out the research to make it feel like it's valid."*

Additionally, many said they do not usually get the annual influenza shot because they do not think or worry about it. In contrast, one person said they "love the flu shot" and get it every year but are not comfortable receiving the Covid-19 vaccine.

*"I feel my attitude has changed a lot. I was always a pro-vaccine person, but after seeing I guess the discrimination that has separated- you can't go to a concert unless you're vaccinated, that type of stuff. I don't really like that. If we live in a place where we can choose for ourselves, our medical freedoms, I don't like being forced to do something, especially if we don't feel it's right for us. And so kind of gone on the way of I'm not anti-vaccine. Like I said, I'm definitely not anti-vaccine, but I also think it's a choice as well."*

## Attitudes on the Benefits and Risks of the Vaccine

Participants discussed adverse reactions to the vaccine several times throughout the focus groups, mentioning fertility problems, getting sick after the shot, and the potential for blood clots. One participant worried about receiving the vaccine while pregnant, and another wondered if it was safe for children under 18. Another generally avoids medication:

*"I was definitely afraid of all of the risks. I felt like the risks outweighed any benefit that the vaccine could offer, so. I'm the kind of person that I don't like to even take medication or anything if I don't have to. I don't even like to take Tylenol, so there's no way I'm going to get the vaccine."*

Participants cited several benefits they see for getting the vaccine:

- Returning to social life.
- Getting out more, being in public, and feeling safer.
- Not passing it on to other people.
- Not getting sick or dying.
- Thinking this research will benefit future science immensely.

In addition, one participant said they did not like the "virtue signaling" with people who are getting vaccinated (which made this participant "rebel" and not want to get vaccinated for some time). They also believed people feel more comfortable when others around them are vaccinated.

*"For me, just not having to worry anymore when you go places that you're going to get it. The other thing, too, is now you're faced with the decision to wear a mask in places where they require a mask if you haven't been vaccinated. So you're identifying yourself if you do wear a mask as somebody who is noncompliant and may be shamed for not getting the vaccine, which I kind of worry about that. I don't know why, but. So, frankly, I don't wear a mask just to avoid that, which probably isn't the best, but. So if I was vaccinated, I could not wear a mask and not worry about getting the disease."*

## Receiving the Vaccine

Out of the sixteen participants, four were fully vaccinated, three had received one dose, and the rest were unvaccinated. Those that were unvaccinated had various reasons for not getting the vaccine. One participant said they felt it would be a long time before the vaccine would be available to them (or the pandemic would be over by then), and when they went to sign up for a vaccine appointment, there were no available slots. Some participants said they had not received the vaccine because they had contracted Covid previously, making them feel their natural immunity should be sufficient.

Additionally, some participants said they are not comfortable with the vaccine overall because (1) it is not FDA approved, (2) there is not enough long-term research, or (3) they are concerned about an allergic reaction or blood clots.

*"As for us, with it still being not FDA approved and in the emergency state and just not knowing the adverse effects, I guess, long term, that's what concerns us is not feeling so comfortable with it."*

Motivating factors to receive the vaccine included travel, attending concerts, or protecting loved ones. However, some said there is no "tipping point" for them. One participant said they think if Covid-19 affected children more than it does, more people would be interested in getting vaccinated. Another participant said they were more eager to get vaccinated when "Covid was [more] unknown and scary," but feels less keen now but will still likely get vaccinated. One participant discussed the aspect of freedom and the dislike of being told they have to get vaccinated.

*"I don't feel like it's up to anyone else to tell me that I have to get the vaccine if I want to be able to go here or there or do this or that. That's my choice, and I'm a firm believer in that. So if you want to tell me that I can't do something because I didn't get something I don't believe in, then to hell with you."*

One focus group discussed their dislike for how “pushy” they felt the government has been with getting vaccinated. Some felt that the incentives felt like “bribe[s]” and the promotion for vaccinations felt “insulting.” One participant said they wished the local government had sent them a letter in the mail discussing the vaccine and their options. Another participant said their child’s school offers the vaccine, and they did not mind the “pushiness.” They also got vaccinated so they would not be the only person in the community unvaccinated.

*“I actually think that a lot of the communication has been really insulting. “You’re so stupid. You’re not getting the vaccine. What’s wrong with you? Do think you can get Covid from the vaccine? You can’t.” And it’s like, “Yeah, I don’t think I’m going to get Covid from the vaccine. I think I’m going to get blood clots and die from the vaccine.” Also, when it first rolled out it was to everybody except for me. That’s how I feel. I feel like, “Oh, I’m not special enough to save. You don’t-- let’s run out and save the old people best we can, not middle-aged people or younger people.” It’s kind of a sour taste in my mouth. It’s like, “Now you can’t give it to me. Now, you can’t give it away.”*

## Vaccine Information

Three participants said they received some information from Intermountain Healthcare, and two said they received information from social media. One said they received information mainly from news articles and not doctors. One said they signed up for emails from the Utah Department of Health and felt the emails they received from them were transparent about risks. Many participants said the information they have seen is more on the encouraging side (pro-vaccine).

Participants cited numerous sources of information they trust:

- Health departments
- Scientists
- Personal doctor or family
- LDS church leaders
- Doctor and husband follow what feels right for them individually.
- Everyone who is in “the fight” of Covid and the medical community
- Doctors, the CDC, and more established organizations, journal articles

In contrast, participants also cited sources they do not trust to receive information regarding the vaccine:

- Any political group
- The media or the government
- Planned Parenthood
- Governor Cox, Dr. Fauci, or anyone else from the state
- Any doctor that says to get the vaccine as a “blanket statement”
- Information on the internet and Facebook

One participant asked the group what incentives would motivate others to be vaccinated. Only two responded to this participant’s question. One said they would not get vaccinated for any amount of money but would either if their child had cancer, it directly benefited someone, or if work required it.

## Next Steps

HERO Project will continue to publish reports summarizing focus groups held with Utahns of various communities and identities. These reports will help to inform the state’s reflection, evaluation, and adaptation of their pandemic response with regard to public perception, concerns, and experiences receiving the Covid-19 vaccine.

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