

Successful Communication with People with Disabilities

Federal law requires covered entities—like COVID-19 testing centers, 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 testing or vaccination processes. Below are tips and guidelines to help you communicate effectively.

Steps for Success

- 1. Introduce yourself.** If the person has an intellectual or developmental disability, say, "Hello, my name is _____ and I'm here to help you. I'm sorry you're not feeling well. We'll do a quick and easy test to find out whether you have COVID-19." Or if you are giving vaccination, "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 test or vaccine, and why it is important. Explain when test results can be expected and how they will receive the results or that they will need a second shot (if applicable) and how long it will take to develop full immunity. Let them know they will have a sore arm or feel kind of achy, and that it's completely normal.
- 3. Ask about preferences.** Ask if the person has any requests for how you give them the test. Do they need help with anything?
- 4. Get permission.** Ask for permission before you administer the test or vaccination.

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.

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 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 test to see if you're sick and help you feel better. Or "We're going to give you a 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 American Sign Language (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. For more about VRI: <https://www.nad.org/resources/technology/video-remote-interpreting/>

Testing sites **can contract for VRI services** to be provided by appointment or to be available on demand.

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



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