

# Take Charge Of Your Health Today. Be Informed. Be Involved.



ESTHER BUSH

## Vaccine Hesitancy

With the new year comes new beginnings, but, for many, especially those in the African American community, 2021 brings with it many feelings of uncertainty. As the COVID-19 vaccine becomes available, people have questions, and a palpable hesitancy can be felt in every corner and neighborhood because of stinging reminders of the past.

This hesitancy and mistrust, at least where the African American community is concerned, stems from years of medical abuse. Well-known examples are the Tuskegee Syphilis Study, where African American men were given no effective care for syphilis so that researchers could track the progression of the disease; the controversial and unethical experiments performed on enslaved African American women by James Marion Sims; and the case of Henrietta Lacks, who passed away from cervical cancer in the 1950s but not before her cells were taken and used for biomedical research without her knowledge or consent. Systemic racism continues to be a barrier to medical care and involvement in research studies for people of color.

The Urban League of Greater Pittsburgh has been a partner of the Community Vaccine Collaborative since this collaborative began in July 2020—first, to increase participation of diverse individuals in vaccine trials and, more recently, to ensure equitable distribution of the COVID-19 vaccines. This collaborative has enabled us the opportunity to speak with researchers and connect them with community partners to strengthen communication about the vaccines. The collaborative is currently conducting a survey on how the African American population feels about the vaccines and our overall sense of the trustworthiness of vaccine-related information. Dr. Maya Ragavan, a researcher with the collaborative, has taken steps to dig deeper and discover what people are really thinking about the vaccine and how members of the African American and Latinx communities are getting their COVID-19 information. In partnership with the Urban League of Greater Pittsburgh's Health Advocacy Program, the collaborative created a 15-20 minute survey.

To participate in this survey, you must identify as a member of the Black or Latino communities (Black, African American, African, Latino, Latina, Latinx or Hispanic), live in or within 50 miles of Pittsburgh, be 18 years old or older and be able to complete the survey in English or Spanish. If you would like to take the survey or have any questions, please email Maya Ragavan (ragavanm@chp.edu) or call or text 412-515-9048. Each survey respondent will receive a gift card for participating.

The coronavirus continues to disproportionately affect the African American population. Black people have some of the highest death rates and have more risk factors for poor outcomes. Deciding to not get the vaccine and protect yourselves and loved ones from the disease could have dire consequences. For years, this "Take Charge of Your Health" series has empowered, inspired and urged you to take charge of your health. Now, more than ever, it is vitally important that you do so. With all matters of heart, mind and body, I always advise my friends and family to educate themselves. Be an advocate for yourself. Make an informed decision on what the best choice is for you and your loved ones.

Take charge of your health, dear reader. I hope that the new year is one of good health and prosperity for you and for those you hold close to your heart.

Esther L. Bush, President and CEO  
Urban League of Greater Pittsburgh



SYLVIA OWUSU-ANSAH, M.D., 42, was among the first UPMC employees to receive the first part of the new COVID-19 vaccine, which arrived Monday morning, Dec. 14, at UPMC Children's Hospital. (Photo courtesy UPMC)

## Vaccine hesitancy in Black and Latinx communities

After successful use in clinical trials proved their COVID-19 vaccines to be roughly 95% effective in preventing the infection, two drug companies have received approval from the U.S. Food and Drug Administration for emergency-use authorization of their COVID-19 vaccines.\* While some people celebrate this step in the fight against the global pandemic, others are cautious about welcoming possible vaccines. University of Pittsburgh researchers want to know more about the reasons people have vaccine hesitancy.

The World Health Organization defines vaccine hesitancy as "the reluctance or refusal to vaccinate despite the availability of vaccines." People are hesitant about vaccines for a variety of reasons. For Black and Indigenous communities and People of Color, some of those reasons stem from their mistreatment and abuse at the hands of academic and medical institutions (infamous examples are the Tuskegee Study the Guatemala Syphilis Study). Other reasons may include systemic racism and its effects in medical settings or even a lack of health care access.

Whatever the cause may be, vaccine hesitancy may influence COVID-19's impact on communities that are already hardest hit by the pandemic. As reported in the COVID Tracking Project, marginalized communities

in the United States get infected and die from COVID-19 at rates more than 1.5 times their share of the population. But people who disproportionately bear the burden of COVID-19 may also be the groups most unsure about getting a vaccine.



MAYA RAGAVAN, MD, MPH, MS

According to a poll conducted by the COVID Collaborative, Unidos US and the NAACP, fewer than half of Black people and 66% of Latinx people said they would definitely or probably get the vaccine.

In Pittsburgh last

The Community Vaccine Collaborative members are working to understand and acknowledge the past and histories of mistrust and trauma perpetrated by research and medical institutions against communities of color, particularly in Black and Latinx communities, as a means to build trustworthiness.

As a member of the Community Vaccine Collaborative, Dr. Ragavan is also currently coleading a study (funded by the Allegheny County Health Department) that is investigating Black and Latinx adults' thoughts about COVID-19 and possible vaccines. People taking the survey are asked where they are getting information about COVID-19 and which sources of information they trust. They are asked whether they would get a COVID-19 vaccination for themselves or their children (when one is available). Additionally, survey respondents are asked about the flu vaccine, which has traditionally had slower uptake rates compared with traditional childhood vaccines.

Another study the Community Vaccine Collaborative is developing would also be used to help build trustworthiness by surveying researchers. Taylor Scott, health advocate with the Urban League of Greater Pittsburgh, and Dr. Ragavan are creating a survey that asks researchers what they know about past histories of mistrust and trauma and how they think trustworthiness can be built. Results from this study will not only inform our understanding of addressing vaccine mistrust but also have implications for building trustworthiness more broadly.

"As a pediatrician, I strongly believe in vaccines," says Dr. Ragavan. "They save lives, and I'll always encourage families to get vaccinated. However, I strongly understand that people may be hesitant in general about trusting vaccines and medical professionals.

"If people are wary of vaccines, they should discuss their concerns with their health care provider. We are here to listen and talk about your questions and concerns. Having a discussion about concerns or questions could help allay some fears," she says.

\*As of January 6, 2021, people have begun receiving Pfizer's and Moderna's vaccines.

## Community Vaccine Collaborative Study

Are you interested in taking a survey about vaccines? We are a team at the University of Pittsburgh, conducting a research study to learn more about sources of trusted information during the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as thoughts about vaccines. This study includes a one-time, 15-20 minute survey. This survey is confidential and anonymous, and anything you tell us will not be linked to your name or other identifying information. You will receive a \$25 gift card for participating.

To participate in this study, you

have to identify as a member of the Black or Latino communities (Black, African American, African, Latino, Latina, Latinx or Hispanic), live in or within 50 miles of Pittsburgh, be 18 years old or older and be able to complete the survey in English or Spanish. If you would like to take the survey or have any questions, please email Maya Ragavan (ragavanm@chp.edu) or call or text 412-515-9048. We can email or text you the link or, if you prefer, read the questions out loud.



UPS DELIVERY DRIVER DALLAS WHITE safely delivers the Pfizer COVID-19 vaccine to UPMC officials, Dec. 14. (Photo courtesy UPMC)

summer, a community group-including people from the Urban League of Greater Pittsburgh, UrbanKind Institute, University of Pittsburgh, Casa San José and the Neighborhood Resilience Project-gathered to make sure marginalized communities were represented in COVID-19 vaccine trials. The Community Vaccine Collaborative is a community-academic partnership that is centered on addressing the disproportionate impact of COVID-19 on marginalized communities.

"We started thinking about the idea of trustworthiness—of the vaccine, of research and of health care professionals," says Maya Ragavan, MD, MPH, MS, assistant professor of pediatrics at the University of Pittsburgh School of Medicine. "We're trying to shift the narrative from 'We just need to keep educating people until they trust research' to 'How can research and medical institutions be more trustworthy?'"