

Research Insights

So you don't want the COVID-19 vaccine? Here's what research shows will change your mind.

Australians' hesitancy to get vaccinated against COVID-19 has increased in recent weeks. According to our data, the key to convincing Australians to get vaccinated is clear information on effectiveness and safety, especially if it is communicated by health professionals or family and friends.

How can we convince Australians to get vaccinated?

The first Australians received the COVID-19 vaccine on 21 February 2021. As the rollout continues more slowly than expected, the debate around the effectiveness of vaccines is ongoing, with new information on vaccine effectiveness coming out almost every day. How this information is communicated and reported can have important effects on people's willingness to be vaccinated. New information from different sources can change beliefs, or reinforce existing beliefs about vaccination, or lead to misunderstandings of the importance of getting vaccinated. A previous [Research Insight](#) showed that just before the vaccine rollout, the proportion of the population willing to be vaccinated was falling (Scott, 2021). Those hesitant to get vaccinated present an obstacle to herd immunity and getting the lives of Australians back to normal.

This Research Insight presents new data from the Melbourne Institute's *Taking the Pulse of the Nation* (TTPN) survey. We compare vaccine hesitancy before and after rollout began, and examine how we can persuade people who are unsure about getting vaccinated to reconsider their decision. This can speed up the vaccine uptake as the rollout continues. The Australian government's effort to accelerate the vaccination uptake needs to be reshaped by using the most appropriate persuasion approach for each socioeconomic group.

Key Insights

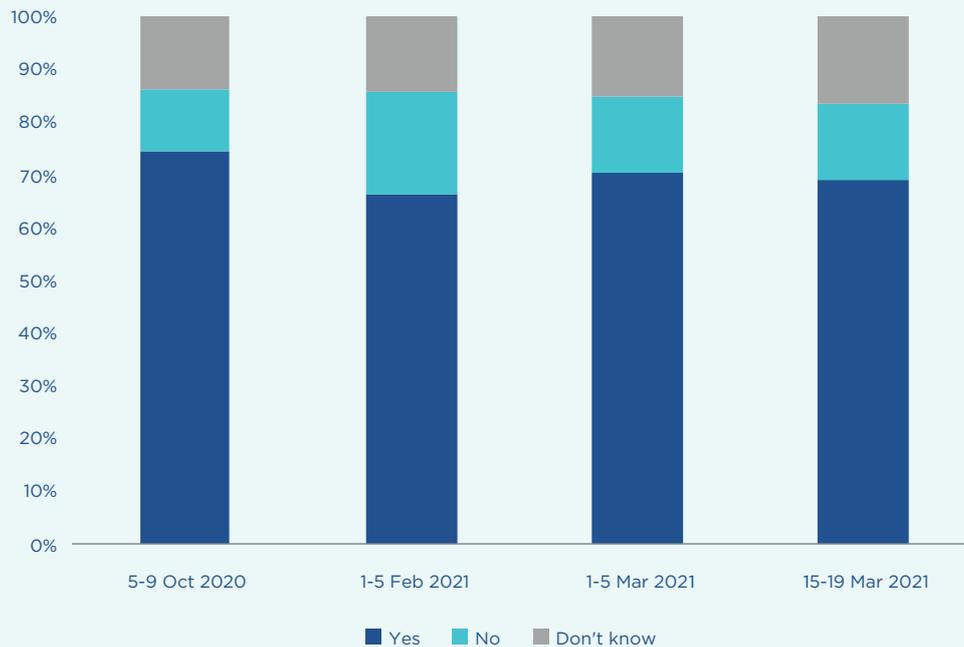
- 1** While Australians' willingness to have a COVID-19 vaccine increased since rollout began, it has recently fallen again, and is still lower than in October 2020.

Two weeks before vaccine rollout, in the first week of February 2021, 66 per cent of Australians were willing to be vaccinated (Figure 1). Just after rollout (1-5 March 2021), this had increased to 70 per cent. However, data from 15-19 March shows the rate had fallen again to 69 per cent. This recent drop corresponds to reports on possible side effects from the Astra-Zeneca vaccine in the middle of March. These rates are all still lower than the 74 per cent willing to be vaccinated in October 2020. The drop in willingness to be vaccinated during 2020 was common across many countries (Lin et al, 2020; Atwell et al, 2021), with vaccine hesitancy increasing as people came out of lockdowns and as vaccine rollout became closer. October 2020 is when some Australians were still under strict lockdown, so the high willingness to be vaccinated at that time may have been because people wanted to help end the lockdown.

The proportion who would refuse to be vaccinated was 12 per cent in October 2020. Just before the rollout, the rate increased at its highest, 19 per cent. In the first week of March, it fell to 14 per cent, and increased slightly again in the middle of March to 15 per cent.

In the same time frame, the number of people who are uncertain about vaccination has steadily increased since October 2020, from 14 to 17 per cent of all Australians. Though there has been some variation in this trend within this period, the overall rise in vaccine hesitancy and refusal, shows that we need a more effective approach to increase willingness to be vaccinated.

Figure 1: The percentage of Australians willing to be vaccinated in October 2020, February 2021 and March 2021

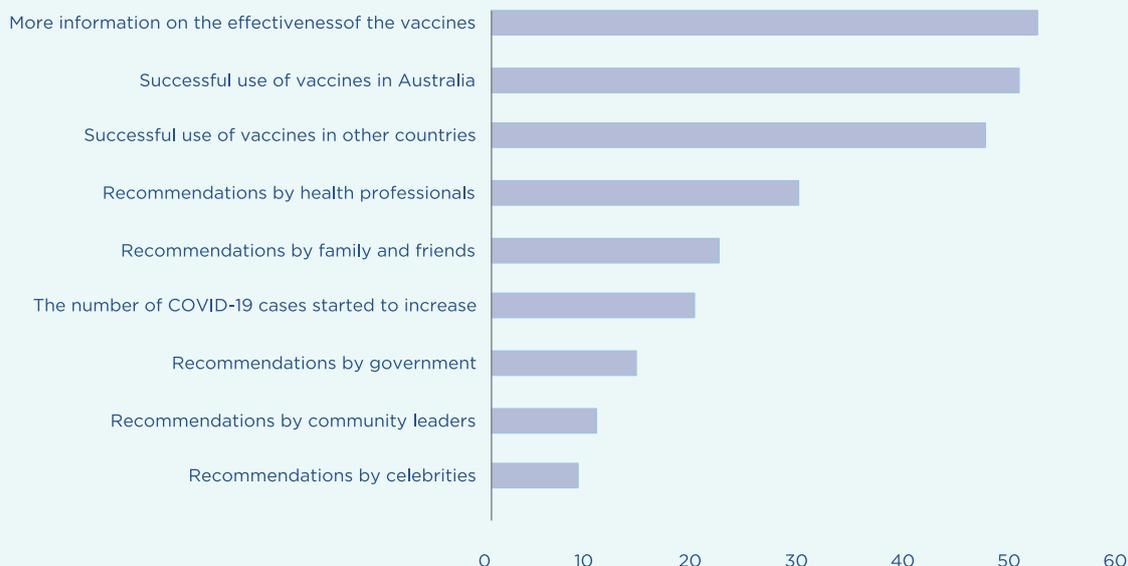


2 Australians are most likely to be convinced to get vaccinated, if they see successful use of vaccination in Australia or in other countries, or if they are given more information on the vaccines' effectiveness.

In the most recent two waves of interviews in March, 30 per cent of the 2,400 respondents said they were unwilling or unsure about having the vaccine. When asked what would persuade them to be vaccinated (Figure 2) 51 per cent of those unwilling or hesitant to be vaccinated would change their

minds if they were given more information about the vaccines' effectiveness. 50 per cent of them could be persuaded by "Successful use of vaccines in Australia" and 47 per cent of them said they are willing to change their minds based on "Successful use of vaccines in other countries."

Figure 2: The percentage of Australians who would be persuaded to get the vaccine for the following reasons March 2021



3 Information on effectiveness and success of vaccines was least likely to persuade people to get vaccinated in Queensland and South Australia, amongst the unemployed, those in rural areas, and those aged 18-24 years old.

There were stark differences across States and Territories in the percentage of who would be persuaded to get vaccinated on the basis of the success of vaccinations in Australia. Only 37 per cent of Queensland and South Australian respondents who were hesitant or refusing to be vaccinated would be persuaded by this evidence (Figure 3) compared to almost 60 per cent in Victoria and Western Australia. Queensland and South Australia had the lowest exposure to COVID-19 in Australia and may think the vaccine is unnecessary compared to those who have experienced harsh and lengthy lockdowns. Information on the success of vaccines in Australia was more likely to persuade those in major cities (54 per cent) to get vaccinated compared to those in rural areas (41 per cent).

The TTPN data also shows that 69 per cent of those aged 65 to 74 would see successful administering of vaccinations as particularly convincing, while only 38 per cent of those aged 18 to 24 would be willing to change their minds in response to evidence of success. The employed were also more likely to be persuaded by evidence of vaccine success compared to the unemployed, and this could reflect differences in education levels and access to information and understanding about vaccines. If more information on effectiveness were to be provided, 56 per cent of those without any financial stress would be willing to change their minds while only 42 per cent of those with financial stress would be willing to do so.

Figure 3: Percentage of Australians who would be persuaded to get vaccinated if the use of vaccines in Australia was successful



4 Only 1 out of 12 respondents are willing to change their minds about vaccination based on persuasion by celebrities. Health professionals, family and friends were the most likely to persuade Australians to get vaccinated.

The government often highlights the roles of community leaders and celebrities as part of its outreach effort. However, they are not a very persuasive source of information. As the TTPN data revealed, Australians that are hesitant or not willing to get vaccinated are more likely to be persuaded by health professionals (29 per cent) and friends and family (22 per cent), whilst persuasion by governments (14 per cent), community leaders (10 per cent), and celebrities (8 per cent) is much less likely to be effective. Health professionals, family and friends, community leaders, and government are more likely to convince men, those in major cities, and those who are employed.

39 per cent of those aged between 18 to 24 are likely to be persuaded by family and friends compared to between 3 and 20 per cent in other age groups. Australians aged 18-24 and 25-44 are more likely to be persuaded by governments (between 14 and 23 per cent) compared to older age groups (between 0 and 5 per cent). While celebrity persuasion is relatively ineffective across most subgroups, it is particularly ineffective among those aged over 45 years old.

Policy Conclusions

As Australia's vaccine rollout continues, around 30 per cent of Australians remain hesitant about vaccination or are unwilling to have the vaccine. There are no signs that this is improving and hesitation remains higher compared to before the vaccine rollout. We need a higher vaccine take-up rate to return to our normal lives as they were before the pandemic and to achieve herd immunity. As part of this process, the federal government invested \$24 million in an outreach effort for those who are vulnerable to infection (Kaufmann, 2021).

Surprisingly, only about 10 per cent of Australians who are uncertain about vaccinations are willing to reconsider their decisions if celebrities, community leaders, or even government tries to convince them. Providing more information about the effectiveness of the vaccines, seems most likely to be a successful form of persuasion. All vaccines approved by the Australian government are safe and effective. Reporting and interpretation of evidence on safety and effectiveness via the media is a key issue. Women, those in rural areas, and the unemployed need to be targeted more effectively. Our research shows that family and friends play a large role in persuading people to have the vaccine. We also show the very strong role that health professionals can play in persuading people to have the vaccine. Health professionals remain highly trusted by Australians, much more so than governments, community leaders and celebrities. Using health professionals to inoculate people more effectively against false information becomes critical as Australia's vaccine rollout continues.

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Further Information

Datasets and methods

Data are used from four waves of the TPPN Survey. Each wave contains responses from 1,200 persons, aged 18 years and over. The sample is stratified by gender, age, and location to be representative of the Australian population.

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References & Endnotes

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