SOCIETY OF BEHAVIORAL MEDICINE

Vaccines

Using Behavioral Medicine to Strengthen Vaccine Confidence, Access, and Uptake

The Society of Behavioral Medicine (SBM) represents 2,400+ scientific researchers, clinicians, industry professionals, educators, and students who work collectively to treat and prevent disease through research and interventions that improve the health of individuals, families, and whole communities. Our members focus on behavior change across the lifespan and work in more than 40 specialty areas, including nutrition, cancer, chronic disease, obesity, and physical activity.

Vaccines stand as a cornerstone of public health and a testament to scientific progress, serving as a vital tool against preventable diseases. Their foundation relies on decades of rigorous laboratory research, robust development, and multi-layered safety testing to ensure benefits far outweigh potential risks. From early concept to approved vaccine, the journey typically spans 10 to 15 years, reflecting the extensive oversight required to bring these life-saving innovations to the world.

Declining immunization rates and gaps in access to reliable sources of care are contributing to increased cases of preventable diseases both domestically and abroad. SBM stands with partners like the American Academy of Pediatrics in urging everyone to stay up to date on recommended vaccinations. Staying up to date on recommended vaccinations helps protect entire communities, prevent diseases, and ensure a healthier future for all.

The Gap Between Availability and Acceptance

Despite rigorous safety standards and widespread vaccine availability, vaccine hesitancy, misinformation, and logistical barriers continue to suppress immunization rates across the lifespan. These challenges have significant economic and public health consequences. Outbreaks of vaccine-preventable illnesses create substantial and avoidable costs for the U.S. healthcare system while also resulting in major productivity losses. Socio-economic barriers further contribute to lower vaccination rates, as structural barriers such as limited pharmacy hours, lack of transportation, and limited access to trusted healthcare providers disproportionately affect rural, low-income, and minority communities. In addition, gaps in trust and communication can make vaccination efforts less effective. One-size-fits-all public health messaging may fail to address the specific concerns of different communities or effectively counter targeted health misinformation.

Why Behavioral Medicine is Critical to Vaccine Success

Behavioral medicine integrates behavioral, biomedical, and social sciences to design evidence-based solutions that translate medical discoveries into real-world health outcomes. Research demonstrates that behavioral interventions can significantly increase vaccine uptake. One effective approach involves communication strategies, such as training primary care providers in empathetic, evidence-based communication techniques, including active listening and presumptive recommendations, which can significantly increase patient confidence in vaccination. Another approach is the use of choice architecture and behavioral nudges, including automated electronic health record (EHR) reminders, simplified scheduling, and co-administration protocols that allow patients to receive routine vaccines during standard pharmacy or healthcare visits. These strategies can make vaccination more convenient and dramatically improve completion rates. Community-grounded outreach is also essential, as partnering with trusted local leaders and pharmacists can improve access to vaccines and address longstanding mistrust more effectively than top-down public health directives.

The Real Impact That Vaccines Have

Vaccines are one of the greatest public health achievements, saving millions of lives and preventing countless cases of serious illness. Over the past 50 years, vaccination programs have saved an estimated 154 million lives worldwide, sparing millions more from debilitating illness and hospitalization (WHO, 2024). From driving

down measles deaths worldwide by over 60 million since 2000 to pushing polio to the brink of global eradication, immunization programs have transformed disease control (WHO, 2024). Today, vaccines continue to protect communities against preventable threats—even helping eliminate major cancers like cervical cancer through HPV immunization—demonstrating their vital, lasting impact on global health and safety.

Although no medical intervention is completely risk-free or offers absolute protection, vaccines remain the single most effective tool for safeguarding both individuals and communities against deadly infectious diseases and their complications. To that end, SBM recommends the following policy priorities.

Recommendations:

- Maintain sustained funding for the National Institutes of Health (NIH) and Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) specifically allocated for implementation science, behavioral research, and vaccine hesitancy mitigation.
- Expand reimbursement models under Medicare and Medicaid for behavioral health integration and provider-led vaccine counseling time, ensuring clinicians have the resources to address patient questions thoroughly.
- Establish clear statutory qualifications and expertise requirements for Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices (ACIP) membership, potentially including vetting through independent scientific and medical organizations.
- Direct federal public health agencies to utilize behavioral medicine frameworks when designing public education campaigns to ensure messaging is culturally resonant, accessible, and transparent.