Ensuring High and Equitable COVID-19 Vaccine Uptake Among Patients With IBD

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The recent emergency use authorization of a third COVID-19 vaccine means that most patients with inflammatory bowel disease (IBD) will soon be eligible to be vaccinated. Gastroenterology clinicians should be prepared to address patients’ concerns regarding safety and efficacy of vaccines. They should also strongly recommend that all their patients be vaccinated with a COVID-19 vaccine. Additionally, they should be prepared to educate patients about logistics that will result in successful vaccination completion. All these measures will be crucial to ensure high uptake among their patients with IBD.

Key Words: immunization, preventive care, vaccination, Crohn’s disease, ulcerative colitis

Abbreviations: CDC, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention; EUA, emergency use authorization; FDA, Food and Drug Administration; IBD, inflammatory bowel disease

Introduction

SARS-CoV2, which causes Coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19), has resulted in a pandemic that continues to spread throughout the United States. In response to the pandemic, COVID-19 vaccine development has moved expeditiously with 3 vaccines recently receiving emergency use authorization (EUA) in the United States.¹ The speed of vaccine development, misinformation about COVID-19 vaccines circulating within the public and on social media, and an environment of political polarization have resulted in widespread mistrust and hesitancy surrounding the COVID-19 vaccine and vaccination programs in the general population.²

Subsets of patients with inflammatory bowel disease (IBD) with pre-existing comorbidities, of advanced age, or taking corticosteroids are at increased risk of severe COVID-19 disease.³ To decrease the risk of COVID-19 disease, it is recommended that all patients with IBD undergo vaccination against SARS-CoV-2 with a COVID-19 vaccine.⁴ Despite this recommendation, reservations persist among the public due to a complex set of factors. Health care providers and their staff specializing in the care of patients with IBD must be well-equipped to mitigate barriers impeding vaccine confidence, as multiple studies show the importance of a strong provider recommendation in improving vaccine uptake.⁵

Vaccine Intent and Confidence

A recent survey from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) showed that COVID-19 vaccination intent (defined as being “absolutely certain” or “very likely” to be vaccinated) increased overall to 49.1% among the general population and to 41.8% among adults 18 to 64 years of age with comorbid conditions.⁶ By continuing to promote vaccine confidence, we can achieve higher vaccine uptake and help prevent the spread of COVID-19. Vaccine confidence is influenced by trust in the safety and effectiveness of COVID-19 vaccines, in health care providers and systems, and in public health institutes such as the CDC.⁷ Inflammatory bowel disease providers are a known, trusted source of information for their patients and will need to play a crucial role in education to ensure high COVID-19 vaccine uptake among their patients.

COVID-19 Vaccine Intent Among Patients With IBD

A recent survey showed that the majority of patients with IBD would be willing to receive a COVID-19 vaccine.⁷ However, a limitation of the study was the lack of generalizability; most respondents had high educational attainment, and 93% iden-
Strongly recommend a vaccine

“I strongly recommend you get a COVID-19 vaccine as soon as you can.”

Discuss the risk of disease and benefits of

Presume patients are open to vaccine administration but lack information on where to get it.

Employ positive framing techniques when discussing the benefits of vaccination.

Discuss the risk of disease and benefits of immunization.

Legitimize concerns, empathize with fears, and normalize hesitancy.

| Strategy                                      | Example                                                                 |
|-----------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Strongly recommend a vaccine                  | “I strongly recommend you get a COVID-19 vaccine as soon as you can.”   |
| Strongly recommend a vaccine                  | “Many people have expressed concerns to me about COVID-19 vaccines. They worry about the speed of vaccine development, the new technology, and/or safety of the vaccines. I’m sure you may have some questions. What questions can I answer for you?” |
| Strongly recommend a vaccine                  | “Do you know how to sign up to get your COVID-19 vaccine?” Provide information about https://vaccinefinder.org |
| Strongly recommend a vaccine                  | “Getting the COVID-19 vaccine will protect you and your family.” |
| Strongly recommend a vaccine                  | “Both this disease and the vaccine are new. We don’t know how long protection lasts for those who get infected or those who are vaccinated. What we do know is that COVID-19 has caused very serious illness and death for a lot of people. We now have evidence that vaccination significantly reduces the risk of becoming infected and needing hospitalization for COVID-19.” |
| Legitimize concerns, empathize with fears,   | “Many people have expressed concerns to me about COVID-19 vaccines. They worry about the speed of vaccine development, the new technology, and/or safety of the vaccines. I’m sure you may have some questions. What questions can I answer for you?” |
| and normalize hesitancy.                     | “Do you know how to sign up to get your COVID-19 vaccine?” Provide information about https://vaccinefinder.org |
| Presume patients are open to vaccine         | “Getting the COVID-19 vaccine will protect you and your family.” |
| administration but lack information on where | “Both this disease and the vaccine are new. We don’t know how long protection lasts for those who get infected or those who are vaccinated. What we do know is that COVID-19 has caused very serious illness and death for a lot of people. We now have evidence that vaccination significantly reduces the risk of becoming infected and needing hospitalization for COVID-19.” |
| to get it.                                   | “Do you know how to sign up to get your COVID-19 vaccine?” Provide information about https://vaccinefinder.org |
| Employ positive framing techniques when      | “Getting the COVID-19 vaccine will protect you and your family.” |
| discussing the benefits of vaccination.      | “Both this disease and the vaccine are new. We don’t know how long protection lasts for those who get infected or those who are vaccinated. What we do know is that COVID-19 has caused very serious illness and death for a lot of people. We now have evidence that vaccination significantly reduces the risk of becoming infected and needing hospitalization for COVID-19.” |
| Discuss the risk of disease and benefits of  | “Both this disease and the vaccine are new. We don’t know how long protection lasts for those who get infected or those who are vaccinated. What we do know is that COVID-19 has caused very serious illness and death for a lot of people. We now have evidence that vaccination significantly reduces the risk of becoming infected and needing hospitalization for COVID-19.” |
| immunization.                                | “Do you know how to sign up to get your COVID-19 vaccine?” Provide information about https://vaccinefinder.org |

Achieving High COVID-19 Vaccine Intent Among All Patients With IBD

Ensuring access and equitable vaccine coverage in all populations would be the best way to achieve high vaccine uptake among all patients with IBD. Inflammatory bowel disease providers may not be able to overcome all barriers that may result in lower vaccine uptake among their patients, but they should be prepared to educate patients and help dispel common myths and misconceptions about COVID-19 vaccines. They should also consider implementing and sharing educational tools such as the CDC COVID-19 vaccination toolkits to build confidence among their health care team in their clinics or health care systems. Additionally, IBD providers, pharmacists, and nurses should feel confident discussing safety, reactogenicity, and COVID-19 vaccine development with their patients. Finally, providers and their health care teams should be familiar with where and how patients can get vaccinated within their region, state, and/or health system. One way to get a vaccine appointment is using online tools such as vaccinefinder.org, an online service where users can search for locations that offer COVID-19 vaccines. However, this method may leave those who are most vulnerable behind, such as patients lacking digital literacy, elderly patients, those working irregular hours, patients with limited English proficiency, or undocumented immigrants who have concerns about their names potentially being shared with local, regional, or federal governments. Therefore, providers should contact their county or state health department for locations that may offer scheduling hotlines or walk-in locations as COVID-19 vaccine availability increases.

How to Recommend a Covid-19 Vaccine

Inflammatory bowel disease providers play a key role in ensuring high vaccine uptake among all their patients. Importantly,
they can help mitigate mistrust of COVID-19 vaccines among patients with IBD who are hesitant to receive the vaccine. We recommend using the following strategies when recommending a vaccine: first, legitimize concerns and normalize hesitancy; second, presume patients are open to receiving a vaccine and discuss the risk of disease and benefits of vaccination; third, employ positive framing techniques when discussing the benefits of vaccination; fourth, discuss the risk of disease and benefits of immunization; and finally, strongly recommend getting immunized (see Table 1 for sample language).

Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic has required IBD providers to take on new professional roles and be adaptable in the many ways they provide care. We strongly suggest they accept the additional task of becoming a COVID-19 vaccine advocate and educator to ensure high uptake of COVID-19 vaccination among all their patients.

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