

"Trust the COVID-19 vaccines. They can save your life."

4 MINUTE READ

March 31, 2021

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Dr. Cynthia Page knows that the COVID-19 vaccines work. They're the best chance of getting our normal way of life back on track, especially for the Black community in New Jersey.

And she's encouraged that more in her community have begun to feel the same way. More Black Americans now plan to get – or have already received – a COVID-19 vaccine, according to a recent [Pew Research survey < https://www.pewresearch.org/science/2021/03/05/growing-share-of-americans-say-they-plan-to-get-a-covid-19-vaccine--or-already-have/>](https://www.pewresearch.org/science/2021/03/05/growing-share-of-americans-say-they-plan-to-get-a-covid-19-vaccine--or-already-have/). Vaccine acceptance among Black Americans increased from 42 percent in November to 61 percent in February.

"The risks of taking the vaccine vs. getting COVID-19 – there's no debate," said Dr. Paige. "The virus can kill. The vaccine helps protect you from its lethal force."

[Dr. Paige < https://www.summitmedicalgroup.com/doctors/cynthia-paige-md/>](https://www.summitmedicalgroup.com/doctors/cynthia-paige-md/), MD, MBA, a family medicine doctor with [Summit Health < https://www.summithealth.com/>](https://www.summithealth.com/) in West Orange, is also an officer with the National Medical Association (NMA), the largest and oldest national organization representing African American physicians and their patients in the U.S.

A task force from the NMA found the COVID-19 vaccines to be safe and had confidence in the [rigorous clinical trials that tested them < https://www.nmanet.org/news/544970/NMA-COVID-19-Task-Force-on-Vaccines-and-Therapeutics.htm>](https://www.nmanet.org/news/544970/NMA-COVID-19-Task-Force-on-Vaccines-and-Therapeutics.htm).

Despite Black Americans' increasing trust in the vaccine, they still trail other groups in their willingness to get vaccinated. In that same Pew Research survey, 69 percent of white people said in February they are likely to get the vaccine.

There are many reasons for this hesitancy, starting with the well-earned mistrust Black Americans have in the health care system. From the Tuskegee experiments, in which Black men with syphilis were promised treatment they never received, to today's ongoing systemic racism within medicine, Black Americans have experienced a long history of the government failing them.

While it's understandable for Black Americans to be skeptical of new health care technologies and their long-term effects, Dr. Paige said, it's also important to follow the science. "These are safe and effective vaccines," Dr. Paige said. "Now that they've been out for almost three months, people can look around and see that for themselves."

Here's what Dr. Paige wants her own patients and other Black Americans to think about in making a decision to get vaccinated:

Understand *all* your risks.

Some Black Americans may be worried about the risks of taking a vaccine, that it will give them serious side effects or harm their health in the future. For one, most side effects have been reported to be very minor. More important, those who are hesitant must also consider their risks of *not* getting a shot.

The science shows that the risks posed by COVID-19 are substantially higher for Black Americans. According to the [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention \(CDC\)](https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/covid-data/investigations-discovery/hospitalization-death-by-race-ethnicity.html) <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/covid-data/investigations-discovery/hospitalization-death-by-race-ethnicity.html>, the Black community has a hospitalization rate 2.9 times greater and a death rate 1.9 times greater than the white community for COVID-19.

There are many reasons for these disparities, said Dr. Paige, including inequitable access to health care, increased transmission in Black communities due to multi-generational households and densely populated neighborhoods, and a disproportionate number of underlying health conditions, including heart disease, obesity and diabetes that are linked to more severe COVID-19 cases.

The science says the vaccine is safe for the Black community.

The NMA wanted to ensure that the African American community independently reviewed the vaccine clinical trial data. They formed a COVID-19 task force composed of leading Black doctors and scientists. They confirmed that 10 percent of the participants in the Pfizer and Moderna trials were Black and that the studies included people with conditions like sickle cell anemia that are more common in Black people.

The trial results, which proved the vaccines to be safe and effective, have been validated in the real world. "Millions of people have now taken the vaccine," Dr. Paige said. "Nearly three months in, the risks are similar to what was observed in the trials."

Listen to those you trust.

Misinformation about the vaccine has been rampant. If you want to know the real facts, turn to trusted organizations like the NMA or better yet, your own physician, Dr. Paige said.

"They know your health the best, and they're familiar with your individual concerns," Dr. Paige added. In addition, listen to people in your own community – local health care, religious

or educational leaders, for example – who have your best interests at heart. "They should be telling you the same thing: it's best to take the vaccine," Dr. Paige said.

She added that it's not solely on patients to overcome their mistrust – doctors also have a role to play. "They need to embrace their public health duty," Dr. Paige added. "They should take the time to answer your questions."

There's a lot more vaccine coming.

Up until this point, getting a vaccine has been difficult, particularly within the Black community. But the availability of vaccines is increasing week by week, and appointments are opening up to larger sections of the State.

It's important that issues of access be addressed to help the Black community, Dr. Paige said. She would like to see the expansion of telephone appointments, which are easier for seniors than going online, "vaccine vans" that could bring vaccinations straight to different neighborhoods, and more local sites like churches and schools offering the vaccine.

Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, the Summit Health Foundation has been boots-on-the-ground via a mobile medical unit supporting the communities hardest hit by COVID-19, she added.

As vaccine supplies increase, they should also be made available at more physicians' offices, Dr. Paige said. "This is where many people may be more comfortable with their own doctor who they trust," she said.

Summit Health has a process in place to gradually make vaccines available to patients according to a [phased < https://covid19.nj.gov/faqs/nj-information/slowing-the-spread/who-is-eligible-for-vaccination-in-new-jersey-who-is-included-in-the-vaccination-phases >](https://covid19.nj.gov/faqs/nj-information/slowing-the-spread/who-is-eligible-for-vaccination-in-new-jersey-who-is-included-in-the-vaccination-phases) State distribution plan. Currently, Summit Health staff are reaching out to their highest risk patients per NJ Department of Health recommendations and as their allocations and capacity allow. Due to very limited dose availability, they are not able to accommodate requests for appointments.

Despite these challenges, Dr. Paige is hopeful that the vaccine acceptance rate continues to rise. "Vaccines will protect you, your family, and your community," she said.

Diverse voices speak up in support of COVID-19 vaccination

Just like Dr. Paige, additional leaders in New Jersey are encouraging all communities to get the vaccine when they are eligible.

A long history of health care inequality and barriers to care have resulted in some communities feeling skeptical about taking the COVID-19 vaccine. Horizon BCBSNJ encourages everyone to get vaccinated against COVID-19 to protect all of New Jersey's residents, especially those who are more at risk for hospitalization or even death. This is our shot to stop COVID-19.