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COVID-19 VACCINE CORONAVIRUS

You can ask your doctors if they've gotten the COVID-19 vaccine, but you may not get an answer. Here's why.

By LISA SCHENCKER
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COVID-19 vaccinations in the Chicago area
(Armando L. Sanchez / Chicago Tribune)

As Illinois reopens and people catch up on long-postponed checkups and health care, some patients have a new question for their doctors: Are you vaccinated?

Many providers say they're happy to share that information with patients, in hopes of assuaging their fears about getting the shots. But it's not always easy information for patients to get ahead of appointments if they're worried about being up-close and personal with unvaccinated doctors, nurses, dentists or optometrists.

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survey by the Kaiser Family Foundation and The Washington Post said they were vaccinated or planning to get the shot.

That percentage has likely increased as vaccines have become plentiful and hesitancy about them has waned, said Ashley Kirzinger, associate director for public opinion and survey research at Kaiser. Still, she said, among both health care workers and the general population, there are some who remain opposed to getting the vaccines.

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The fact that many people remain unvaccinated has some people asking everyone in their lives — including health care providers — if they've gotten shots.

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“After 16 months of pandemic, it makes sense that people ... are concerned about their safety and who they're coming into contact with,” Kirzinger said. “We're getting used to asking our friends and family members and each other if they're vaccinated, so it makes sense that individuals would also be asking that of their health care providers.”

Not all health systems, however, may be willing or able to reveal individual health care workers' vaccination statuses.

Sharon Butler, a vaccinated senior who lives in Streeterville, asked the receptionist

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performing the test was vaccinated. To her disappointment, the receptionist wouldn't disclose that information.

“I need to know if I'm putting myself at risk of contracting COVID and whether health care workers who are treating me are vaccinated is important information,” Butler said.

Under Illinois law, organizations that handle people's personal information, including medical information, are required to protect it, said Sara Shanti, a partner in the health care group at law firm Benesch in Chicago. Also, if providers work for a large health system where they are also patients, their vaccination status would be protected under the federal law restricting release of medical information.

Individual doctors, nurses, dentists and optometrists are free to answer questions about whether they've been vaccinated, Shanti said. But their employers or institutions likely can't release that information without their permission.

“Vaccination status, even for our employees, is protected health information,” said Christopher King, Northwestern Medicine spokesman, in an email. “Therefore, we cannot disclose any person's health information without their consent.”

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NorthShore University HealthSystem also said in a statement, “Out of respect for employee privacy, we do not share individual vaccination status.”

Other health care organizations, however, say their medical workers have given approval to share the information. Dr. Don Hoscheit, chief medical officer at DuPage Medical Group, said all the doctors in his gastroenterology department have been vaccinated and are “very, very comfortable sharing that health information with our patients.”

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Dr. Lisa Russell, an infectious disease physician at Sinai Chicago, called it “a very powerful approach to work through vaccine hesitancy.”

“It’s not uncommon for me to bring it up and say: ‘Listen, I was vaccinated. I did very well. I didn’t have significant side effects,’” Russell said. “It’s not something (information) I would keep from anybody that is our patient.”

Dr. Carl Lambert, a family doctor at Rush University Family Physicians, said sharing his own vaccination experience can help comfort patients who may be undecided about the vaccine. Many of his patients are Black or Latino.

He’s heard his patients describe misinformation they received from family members or social media. Some patients distrust the medical system. He’s heard patients say, “Don’t Tuskegee me,” referring to the notorious Tuskegee syphilis study, in which the U.S. government and Tuskegee Institute conducted a decadeslong study on Black men with syphilis without treating them for the disease, even after treatment became available.



Dr. Carl Lambert is seen June 7, 2021, at Rush Primary Care in Chicago. (Vashon Jordan Jr. / Chicago Tribune)

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“In that conversation, oftentimes I will just say, ‘Hey, full transparency, I’ve received a vaccine,’” Lambert said. “A lot of times, it’s patients on the fence. They’re like, ‘Let me ask a trusted source,’ and for a lot of folks, that’s their primary care doctor.”

lschencker@chicagotribune.com

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