Vacci-Dating: Is It Wise to Share Vaccination Status on Online Dating Apps?

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As cold weather descended upon Washington, D.C., last fall, I deleted my dating apps.

I had tried a few video-chat dates when the pandemic was new last spring. They were fun and novel at the time, and felt like a "quarantine experience." By summer, I went on several physically distant dates in the park.

But once the temperature started dropping, meeting outside lost its appeal. First dates are awkward enough without shivering as your breath freezes to your mask, all while trying to uncover the title of someone's favorite book. So I bailed.

Something happened recently, though, that made me return to the dating app world. A local website published an article about people announcing their vaccination status in dating app profiles. Other news outlets followed. I had to see it with my own eyes.

So, I redownloaded my favorite apps: Hinge, Bumble and Tinder. I disclosed in my bio that I was a journalist working on a story about people announcing their vaccination status in dating profiles. Then, I spent the next three hours madly swiping.

Lo and behold, I found several 20- and 30-somethings proudly displaying their vaccine status. One wrote at the top of his profile, "I got both doses of the Pfizer, COVID vaccine!" Another said, "im covid19 free got vaccinated too."

I messaged them all. Noel, a nurse who lives in the D.C. area, got back to me. He said he put "COVID vaccinated" in his bio as a statement for what he stands for. (KHN is not identifying Noel by his last name because he's concerned about being identified by his employer.)

"I take very seriously the responsibility to care for myself in order to keep others safe," he wrote. Noel, who has received both vaccine doses already, said his status announcement has gotten him only positive responses so far. Some people even seemed reassured by it.

It made me wonder: Should this declaration give people the peace of mind to start increasing the frequency of in-person dates? When considering whether to meet up with someone who is vaccinated versus unvaccinated, vaccinated does sound safer. It even initially gave me a spark of hope. But should it?

I polled a few friends who use dating apps. They told me they had indeed spotted the same trend. One who lives in Los Angeles is even going on a FaceTime date with a guy who had "PS I'm vaccinated" in his Hinge bio. She still opted for a video chat, though. "Can't they still be carriers even if they're vaccinated?" she texted me.

The next day, I called Leana Wen, MD, an emergency room physician, public health expert and visiting professor at George Washington University.

I asked her what those of us who might be swiping on the apps should think if we come across someone who advertises that they have been vaccinated.

First, Wen gave me the reality check I expected, and kind of deserved.

"It's not a free pass," she said. "We don't know whether 'if' somebody is vaccinated means they will no longer be a carrier of coronavirus. They may still be able to infect you even if they are safe from coronavirus themselves."

Studies have shown that the Moderna, Pfizer-BioNTech and Johnson & Johnson vaccines, the three vaccines currently available in the U.S. under emergency use authorizations, significantly reduce COVID-19 symptoms and are effective in preventing hospitalizations and death from the disease. But it's still possible for those who are vaccinated to get sick with COVID-19. And research is pending on how great the risk is that those who are vaccinated can carry the virus and pass it on to others.

Anthony Fauci, MD, director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, said in a recent White House COVID-19 press briefing that early studies from Spain and Israel indicate vaccination seems to lead to lower viral loads in the body, which can mean a fully inoculated person is less likely to pass COVID-19 on to someone else. But questions remain about transmissibility.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recommends that those who are vaccinated continue to wear masks and maintain physical distance as the vaccine rollout proceeds. Public health experts also point to the emerging COVID-19 variants that are finding a foothold in the U.S. The available vaccines appear to be less effective against the variants, another reason for people to be vigilant.

Wen said if two unvaccinated parties who match on a dating app want to meet up, they should take the precautions we've heard about since the beginning of the pandemic: meet outdoors, keep 6 feet apart and ask about your favorite book from behind a face-fitting mask.

If both unvaccinated people eventually want to meet indoors, she added, and they both live alone, they could. But it is not exactly a romantic process. They could quarantine for several days. Then both could get a COVID-19 test and, as long as they both have negative results, meet up.

However, if you're like me and live with roommates, and especially if your new paramour also lives with others, too, then that adds more layers of complications.

"Then you take on the risk of all those individuals that live in the other house," said Wen. "Let's say all those other people have relationships with someone else, who then have extended networks too. Now your pandemic pod is not with four roommates, it's potentially with dozens of individuals."

"You're only as safe as the highest-risk person," she added.

There is one silver lining, though, said Wen. She believes if two people are vaccinated they can safely get together.

"We don't know this for certain, but here's what I would say for people who are vaccinated and live alone," said Wen. "I actually think you could pretty safely see somebody else who is vaccinated."

Wen issued this advice, she said, with the assumption that both people are trying to mitigate their COVID-19 transmission risk by wearing masks in public, washing hands, minimizing social circles and not frequenting indoor spaces. Matches should discuss what safety precautions they're taking before meeting up.

This recommendation also applies to us unvaccinated daters — we should all be having open conversations with our matches about what COVID-19 precautions we're taking and in what circumstances we would feel comfortable meeting in person.

Think about this open communication the way you would talk to a potential sexual partner about the precautions you're taking to prevent sexually transmitted infections or pregnancy. If it's not something the person is willing to discuss, then perhaps they aren't someone with whom you want to meet up.

But, never fear. As eligibility for the COVID-19 vaccine opens up to groups that may include younger people, it's likely vaccine status will gain more prominence in dating profiles. While vaccines were initially limited to health care workers, long-term care facility residents and those 65 and older, eligibility categories in some states are widening to include other essential workers and people with underlying medical conditions.

It also seems possible that dating app companies may eventually roll out a feature to select or highlight your vaccination status in your profile, rather than having to write it in the bio, said Jennifer Reich, a sociology professor at the University of Colorado-Denver, who studies vaccine attitudes.

“I think we could imagine a range of things around COVID-19. We could imagine fields about working from home, vaccine status, antibody status,” said Reich. “Adding these to your profile could help users figure out how they want to manage risk in their lives and what levels of risk they want to take.”

As for me, now that the dating apps are downloaded on my phone again, maybe I’ll give video dates another shot. At least until it’s summer again or I get my own vaccine — whichever comes first.

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