

Navigating the New Workplace: Religion and COVID-19 Vaccines

As our knowledge about COVID-19 evolves, many companies are assessing whether and how to return to work. Key in their decision-making is how to handle vaccines. Should the company require employees to be vaccinated? Or focus on encouraging them? Or, stay silent? And how do their employees feel about vaccines? What are their questions and concerns?

When evaluating how to respond, companies have much to consider – including religion-based objections to vaccines and employees' legal right to be accommodated for their religious beliefs at work (so long as the accommodation does not cause the business undue hardship). Tanenbaum offers the following better practices and resources to address these concerns.

What Can You Do in Your Workplace?

Choose Your Approach: Companies have influence over workplace policies but, also, with their employees. As of this writing, most corporate workplaces are disinclined to require vaccines, but many are considering the encouragement route, which can also create a COVID-safe culture.

Leadership Modeling: Company leadership publicly getting the vaccine can influence what your employees choose to do. Company leadership promotes the vaccine by publicly getting the shot, sharing about their decision and the impact they believe it has on the workplace.



Company Modeling:

- Create company volunteer teams to support vaccinations in the local community.
- If you have ERGs, partner with them in creating a COVID-safe culture.
- Publicize ERG and company outreach efforts in the community.
- Create opportunities for employees to share their COVID stories.
- Use Corporate Communications to remind of the benefits beyond the workplace – travel, attending events, removing a mask (in certain situations).



Policy Encouragement:

- Provide paid time off for employees to get the vaccine and for one to two days afterward.
- Reimburse associated out-of-pocket costs.
- Provide transportation to vaccine sites and/or collaborate with local partners.

Policy Review: Now is a good time to review your accommodation process. Is your process clearly defined and communicated to your workforce? If an accommodation is denied, is the process for the employee to challenge the decision clear?

Be Prepared: Anticipate that employees may have concerns or object to getting vaccinated – including because of religious reasons. Consider polling employees anonymously and voluntarily to learn their thoughts, plans, and their objections to getting vaccinated.

Understand Objections – Including Religion-Based Objections: Understanding objections will position you to consider possible accommodations or alternative working arrangements in the company. Ensure you have accurate information to respond to these concerns when they arise (see Tanenbaum’s paper [Vaccines & Our Health - What Do You Need to Know?](#) for more information).

Keep the Information Coming: Inform employees where, when and how they can access the vaccine with posters, information in multiple languages via email or intranet.

Digging Deeper on Religious Objections to Vaccines

Many religions have positions on the propriety of vaccination(s). Below is a summary of a number of them. Still, individual believers may have sincere interpretations and practices that differ from their faith’s official approach and that legally may need to be accommodated. When confronted with these issues, it can be helpful to know what various traditions are saying about vaccines. Navigating these conversations can be challenging. Tanenbaum can support you in that and more. [Contact us](#) for additional information.

- **Catholicism:** The Church has an official position on those vaccines that were initially developed from laboratory cell lines derived from two elective aborted fetuses (the vaccines themselves contain no fetal cells). [It states:](#) While Church members should seek alternatives, when available, to vaccines using cell lines derived from aborted fetuses, there is a moral obligation to use a vaccine for purposes of overall public health, regardless of a vaccine's potential association with abortion.

With respect to COVID-19 vaccines, the Church [reiterated this position](#). Neither the Pfizer nor Moderna vaccines, which have been approved for use in the U.S., are manufactured using fetal cell lines. The Johnson & Johnson vaccine does use the cell lines as part of their production and manufacturing process, however, and Catholics may therefore be more reluctant to take that vaccine.

- **Christian Scientists:** Christian Scientists have no formal policy against vaccines, but generally rely on prayer and spiritual practices centered on the teachings of Jesus Christ for healing. Their faith holds that medical interventions, which can include vaccines, are unnecessary. That noted, a core Christian Scientist ethic is to be law abiding and to respect the rights of others, which may include getting vaccinated if the wider community needs this done. More information can be found in Tanenbaum's thorough paper on vaccines and healthcare, [available here](#).
- **Judaism and Islam:** Both religions direct adherents not to eat pork, and take similar approaches to vaccines that include porcine gelatin (as of this writing, none of the COVID-19 vaccines include porcine gelatin).
 - Muslims permit porcine gelatin in vaccines because there is a medical necessity and all life is considered sacred. However, if a non-porcine alternative is readily available and protects health and life, it should be taken.
 - Under Jewish law, the highest obligation is to preserve life and, according to most Jewish authorities, that includes taking life-saving vaccinations that include porcine gelatin to preserve one's own health and the health of the broader community. If there is a vegan alternative, it is preferred but not required.
- **Hindu, Buddhist, Jain, and Sikh:** Although many adherents of these traditions abstain from eating meat based on their religious and/or philosophical precepts to do no harm, degrees of abstention vary. If a vaccine contains animal byproducts, some may refuse it and seek a vegetarian or vegan alternative ([more information available here](#)). Generally, these traditions view personal choice and duty as linked, so that an individual's decision regarding a vaccine is often made by considering one's obligation to contribute to a greater good. With the COVID-19 vaccines, this could involve weighing the harm incurred in the vaccine's creation against the harm to society from refusing to take it.

For more useful information on world religions, subscribe to Tanenbaum's online resource, Religion at Work: A (Human) Resource. Visit <https://tanenbaum.org/religion-at-work-resource/> to learn more or contact Tanenbaum at workdiversity@tanenbaum.org