



COVID-19 Vaccines and MS Video Series

The Cultural Context of Vaccine Hesitancy

Featuring:
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Mitzi Joi Williams:

Hi, my name is Dr. Mitzi Joi Williams. I'm a board-certified neurologist and fellowship-trained MS specialist. I'm also the medical director and founder of the Joi Life Wellness MS Center in Atlanta, Georgia. I am also pleased to be the co-chair of the African American Advisory Board for the MS Association of America.

When thinking about the historical context of vaccine hesitancy, we really have to take a look at the interaction between certain groups and the medical or healthcare system. For instance, if we think about Black or African Americans here in the US, there's a very long, unfortunately sordid history of bias and discrimination within the healthcare system and even people still today have difficulty with interacting with the system in terms of their symptoms being heard and believed, etc.

So when we think about new therapies, especially something that came to the market what seemed to be very quickly, it is not unbelievable to think that people would have hesitancy in engaging in this way with something that's brand new to the system.

Before we can move past grievances or past events, we have to acknowledge what happened and then look forward.

At this point, the data is very clear that the vaccines are safe, and they are effective in preventing severe cases of COVID-19. Often, when I talk to patients, I go back to the data. Some of the major trials had 25,000, 30,000 people who were in these trials and we saw that overall, the long-term safety has been very good.

Now that the medications have been put out into the real world, we see some side effects that have occurred, but certainly very minimal in terms of numbers, as compared to the whole population of people who have been vaccinated. I can speak from personal experience as a person who contracted COVID before there was a vaccine and I was very sick for months and wish that I had a vaccine that I could have taken to try to prevent some of that illness.

So we want to make sure that when we are talking about the benefits that we do acknowledge the risks and that they do exist, but again, come back to the fact that the benefits largely outweigh the risk when we're talking about vaccination for COVID-19.