

# How to ensure a context-specific response to events that may erode trust



## How to use this document

This document proposes an algorithm for analysing vaccine safety events and other events that have the potential to erode confidence in vaccines and health authorities.

Analysing events is necessary to determine the appropriate communication response.

The document describes three overall kinds of events and a process to help you determine whether these events may have low, medium or high impact on trust in vaccination and health authorities. The communication response should be planned according to this.

The algorithm will allow you to ensure context-specific responses that may prevent a situation from escalating.

Use the algorithm as a routine procedure whenever an event occurs.



## How was this document developed?

This document is part of a WHO series of supporting documents concerning events that could erode confidence in vaccination. Such events can be related to vaccine safety, adverse events following immunization, changes in the vaccination programme, negative public debate, outbreaks or pandemics.

All documents were developed based on scientific evidence, laboratory research and fieldwork within psychology, social and behavioural science and communication and lessons learnt in countries. For an introduction to the theoretical background and evidence, refer to the WHO publication *Vaccination and trust*, available here: [www.euro.who.int/vaccinetrust](http://www.euro.who.int/vaccinetrust).

The supporting documents are intended for use by national

- ministries of health
- centers for disease control
- immunization programmes
- regulatory authority institutions.



**World Health  
Organization**




REGIONAL OFFICE FOR  
**Europe**

## How to ensure a context-specific response to events that may erode trust

When and how should national immunization authorities actively respond to an event which may potentially erode confidence in vaccines or health authorities? Use the guidance below to analyse the event and determine your response.

### Situations where confidences may erode

Many events have the potential to erode confidence in vaccines and health authorities. They include:

- 
**unwanted events** that are rightly or wrongly connected with vaccination, such as vaccine safety and adverse events following immunization, which may create feelings of insecurity and distrust.
- 
**changes in the immunization programme**, such as introducing a new vaccine, replacing one vaccine with a new kind of vaccine, conducting vaccination campaigns, suspending a vaccine or temporarily recalling a vaccine, which may create uncertainty in the public.
- 
**public and media debate on vaccination**, including personal social media stories, critical media reports or new critical scientific studies.

### When and how should you respond?

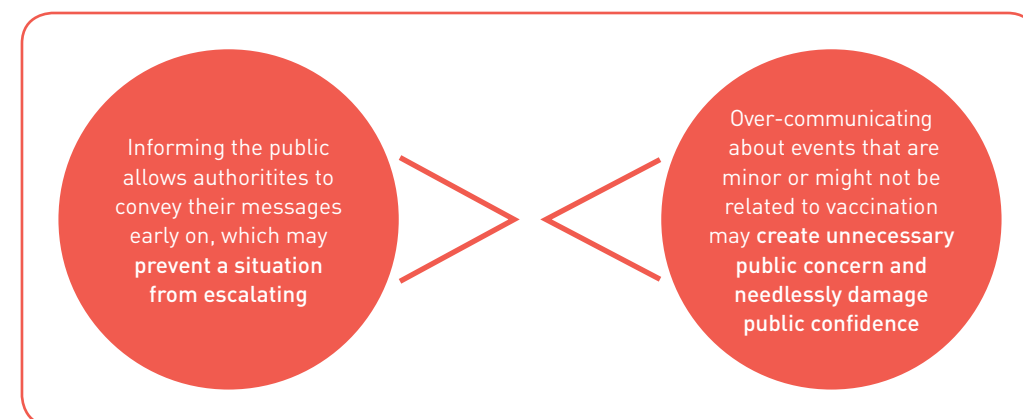
Such events are quite common, so the communication response must depend entirely on the event and its context:

- Not all events escalate into a crisis.
- Not all events require a communication response.

The dilemma can be illustrated as in Fig. 1.

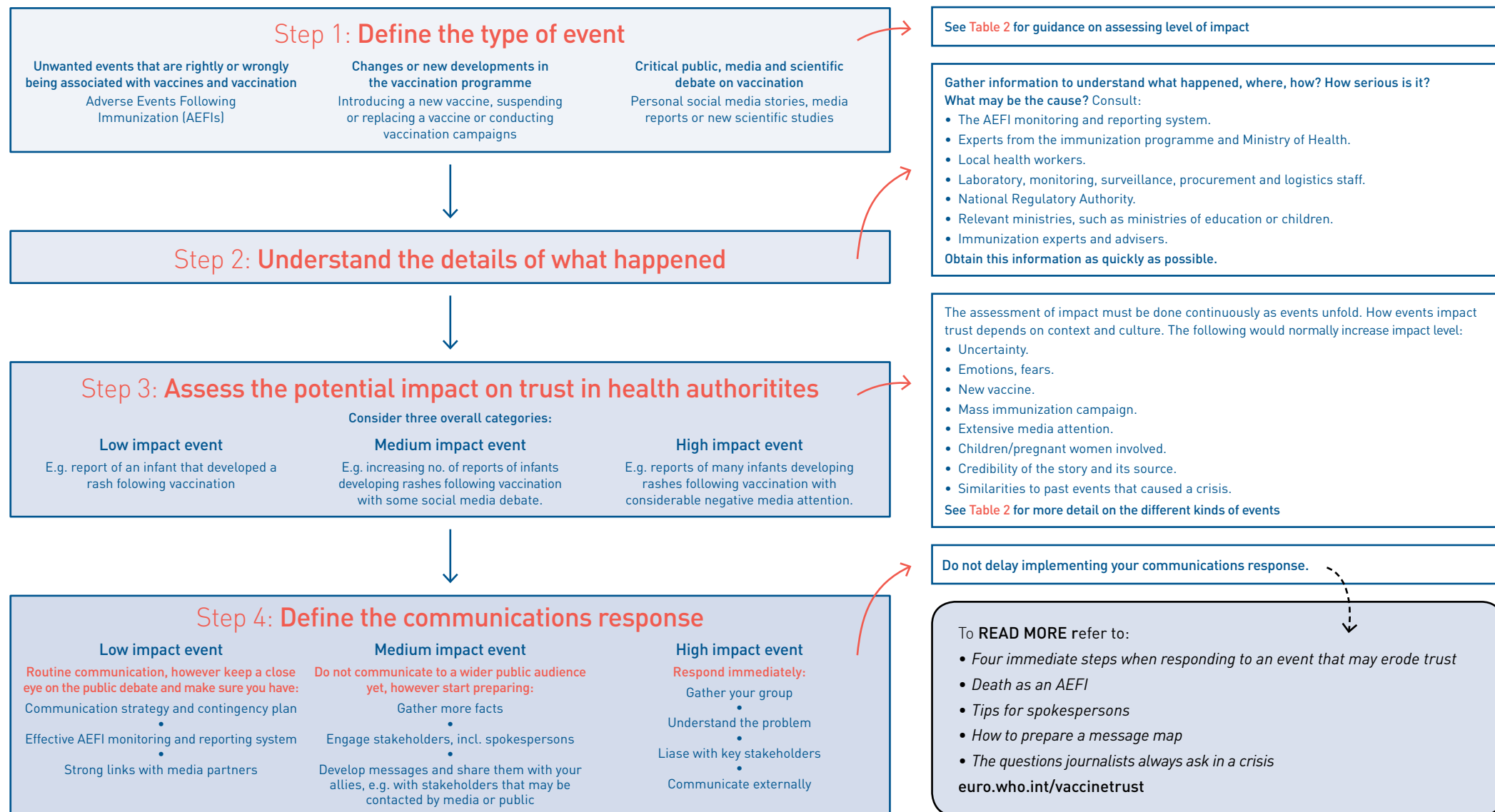
The following pages can be used to analyse **when to communicate, and what level of communication is appropriate**

Fig. 1  
The immunization communication dilemma



# How to ensure a context-specific response to events that may erode trust

Table 1. Analysing the event to determine the communication response



## How to ensure a context-specific response to events that may erode trust

Table 2. Events and impact levels

Event	Description	Level of impact on trust in vaccines			Remember
Unwanted events that are rightly or wrongly being associated with vaccines and vaccination (AEFIs)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Includes:               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>unwanted events that are rightly associated with vaccination,</li> <li>unwanted events that are wrongly associated with vaccination.</li> </ul> </li> </ul>	<p>Of <b>LOW</b> impact when...</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Event is not serious or dramatic.</li> <li>Event is serious but not relevant in the context (e.g. reaction in another country with a vaccine not used in the country).</li> <li>Event gets no attention in the media or public.</li> </ul>	<p>Of <b>MEDIUM</b> impact when...</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Event is serious.</li> <li>Event is relevant in the context (e.g. in the country or in another country with a vaccine used in the country).</li> <li>Event gets no media attention at this stage, but media attention could be anticipated.</li> </ul>	<p>Of <b>HIGH</b> impact when...</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Media attention is high and public reactions strong.</li> <li>Event is serious</li> <li>Event has unknown cause.</li> <li>Event is memorable or dramatic.</li> <li>Event happens during a change in immunization programme (below).</li> <li>There are clusters of reactions (more than one).</li> <li>There are reactions among children, teenagers, pregnant woman.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>It is advisable always to be prepared to respond to these events with holding statements and trained spokespersons.</li> <li>Such events can be the cause of insecurity or anxiety in the public and may be broadly publicized.</li> <li>Any response should be transparent and explain how the event is being investigated and how information will be shared.</li> <li>Monitoring of media and public reactions is critical.</li> </ul>
Changes or new developments in the vaccination programme	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Includes:               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>introducing a new vaccine,</li> <li>replacing one vaccine with another vaccine,</li> <li>conducting vaccination campaigns (Supplementary Immunization Activities),</li> <li>suspending a vaccine,</li> <li>temporarily recalling a vaccine.</li> </ul> </li> <li>Can be a <i>planned measure</i> to improve population protection against diseases or improve safety and efficacy</li> <li>Can be a <i>precautionary measure</i> in a situation of uncertainty.</li> <li>Can take place in another country, but relate to a vaccine used in the national immunization programme.</li> </ul>	<p>Of <b>LOW</b> impact when...</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Vaccines are replaced with only slightly reconfigured products.</li> <li>There is no public attention.</li> </ul>	<p>Of <b>MEDIUM</b> impact when...</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Vaccines are replaced, and there is no or very little public attention.</li> </ul> <p><b>Vaccine replacements are usually of medium impact.</b></p>	<p>Of <b>HIGH</b> impact when...</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>There is negative media coverage.</li> <li>There is significant public concern and a lack of understanding of reasons behind the event.</li> <li>Cultural sensitivities create negative response, e.g. concerning the country of origin of new vaccine.</li> <li>Change is related to vaccine safety (e.g. unwanted events happen during programme changes, or replacement was the result of an adverse event following immunization) (see above).</li> </ul> <p><b>New vaccine introduction, vaccine recalls, vaccine suspensions and vaccination campaigns are usually of high impact.</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>When such changes are decided, it is advisable always to be prepared for media interest and public concerns.</li> <li>Communication should carefully explain the reason(s) behind the changes made to resolve any uncertainty.</li> <li>In case of a recall/suspension, it should be made clear it is precautionary, reflecting a cautious, safety-first approach.</li> <li>In case of a new pandemic influenza vaccine it should always be considered a new vaccine as it combats a novel strain of influenza.</li> </ul>
Public, media and scientific debate on vaccination	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Includes:               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>factual media accounts of scientific publications,</li> <li>unverified rumours,</li> <li>personal social media stories,</li> <li>critical media reports,</li> <li>new critical scientific studies.</li> </ul> </li> <li>Can be factual, partly factual, anecdotal or untrue.</li> <li>Can be national or international.</li> </ul>	<p>Of <b>LOW</b> impact when...</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Story receives little to no public attention.</li> <li>Story does not play on emotions or fears.</li> <li>Story is not believable</li> <li>Research has low credibility.</li> <li>Research is unlikely to receive public attention.</li> </ul>	<p>Of <b>MEDIUM</b> impact when...</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Story receives some public attention.</li> <li>Story triggers some emotional fears.</li> <li>Research receives some public attention.</li> <li>Story is plausible.</li> </ul>	<p>Of <b>HIGH</b> impact when...</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Story receives significant public attention; taps into emotional fears.</li> <li>Source has high readership/viewership.</li> <li>Source is credible and influential.</li> <li>Research receives significant public attention and spreads fast.</li> <li>Source has high credibility or influence.</li> <li>Story relates to a sensitive issue (e.g. pregnant women, infants).</li> <li>Story is published/spreads during changes in the vaccine programme (see above).</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Debates on the safety or necessity of vaccines are common, esp. on social media. In most cases, it is not recommended to respond in public.</li> <li>Scientific research from less credible sources, questioning the benefits or safety of vaccination, are not rare. Often they will not create any public reaction and a public response is not advisable.</li> <li>When response is required, it should be kept in mind that misperceptions are not debunked just because someone explains the facts.</li> </ul>