

South Africa Covid-19 & Vaccine Social Listening Report

30 May 2022, Report 51

This is a weekly report of Covid-19 and vaccine sentiment, rumours & misinformation in SA.

KEY TRENDS

“We are the majority!” Now over half of adults in the country have had at least one Covid vaccination. The number is 50.03% ([here](#)). While this is a long way from the target of 70% of the whole population being fully vaccinated, it is a milestone which should be celebrated. However, this is not widely known - most people in the country do not know that most adults have vaccinated. It is the task of health communications to make this visible so everyone in the country is aware of it. This could have a major effect on shifting the social norm and make it more acceptable for others to vaccinate. Gauteng leads other provinces in terms of jabs administered with over 10 million ([Here](#)), followed by KwaZulu-Natal with more than five million vaccinations ([Here](#)).

Vaccine hesitancy and acceptance. Successful vaccination was attributed to more “improved and frequent messaging about vaccination” ([Here](#)), and “distrust of government” and “misinformation” were the main reasons for vaccine hesitancy ([Here](#)). From a study by the university of Johannesburg and the HSRC ([Here](#) and [here](#)), White people are the most hesitant to vaccinate against Covid (48%), followed by coloured people, while the black population are more accepting of vaccination ([Here](#)). The youth were more hesitant than the older group ([Here](#)). Youth comments included, “*The mistrust in the government will never be corrected*” and “*The media and the propaganda also perpetuate distrust of government*” ([Here](#)). Comments received by the NICD were mostly negative towards vaccination, with the following comments concerning natural immunity:

- “*I now start doubting the efficacy of these vaccines and the so-called boosters*”
- “*People die. It's what happens. Why is it necessary to bubble wrap ourselves from dying*”
- “*Ek gaan vir niks ek kort niks me keer niks so hou op lieg*”
- “*The fake vac violates all 10 Nuremberg codes. Gene Therapy injection*”

No breakout social media topics. Leading search queries related to vaccine updates, vaccination sites and whether Covid tests were needed for domestic flights. Engagements with vaccine related Twitter posts were up 25% including claims that “*Monkeypox is shingles caused by the Covid vaccine*” which featured in two of the five top posts, and that “*people would survive Monkeypox without vaccine in the same way they survived Covid without vaccines*”. There was a 50% drop in levels of engagement with vaccine related content on digital news media and Facebook posts which included “*ACDPs continued protests against Covid regulations for church gatherings*”, “*Pfizer effectiveness for under 5s*” and “*Telkom's new mandatory vaccination policy for employees, service providers and contractors.*” [Here](#), [Here](#) [Here](#), [Here](#) and [Here](#)

New phase of Covid in SA. According to the NICD, the absence of a new, more severe variant means future spikes in Covid infections are unlikely to result in large increases in hospitalisations and deaths, because of high level of immunity, “*it is possible to have substantial surge in transmission that does not overwhelm the health system, even without putting new restrictions.*” ([Here](#)). Hospital admission data also show a decline. While there have been deaths during this resurgence, the figures are much lower compared to previous waves of Covid in SA ([Here](#)).

Monkeypox concerns. There is great concern, though there have been no confirmed cases of Monkey pox in SA, according to the National Institute for Communicable Diseases. While there aren't new anti-vaccination and Covid conspiracies, several new ones have surfaced around Monkeypox ([Here](#)). Misinformation about the spread of Monkey pox has appeared in many online conversations, including misinformation from Covid being translate into the Monkeypox narrative. Other misinformation says that Monkey pox is a conspiracy for pharmaceutical companies to make more profits, “*The K is silent, Monkey pox = Money pox*”. Media reports

about monkey pox have been criticized as racist. “Why must Africa feature in the evolution of the outbreak, stop this racist reporting” ([Here](#)). “Why don't you show those Europeans that are affected by the so-called pandemic rather than displaying pics of black people... Racism must fall!” ([Here](#)). “Lessons from the AIDS response show that stigma and blame directed at certain groups of people can rapidly undermine outbreak response.” ([Here](#)). They also claimed the authorities that “they are planning a pandemic when monkeypox is fully treatable so that they could add truth to their narrative,” when the infectious disease experts were reportedly “pushing for faster action to contain the spread” ([Here](#)) and ([Here](#)).

Study finds that vaccines offer little protection against long Covid. Vaccination against SARS-CoV-2 lowers the risk of long Covid after infection by only about 15%, according to a study of more than 13 million people ([Here](#)). The good news is that, “future upticks in Covid cases are unlikely to overwhelm South Africa’s health system – unless a new, harsher variant arises here or spreads to the country from somewhere else” ([Here](#)). Nearly all South Africans now have some form of immunity ([Here](#)).

DISTRICT REPORTS

This information comes from District Communicators working in districts around the country.

OR Tambo (Eastern Cape): Challenges include poor transport, no loudhailer, no vehicle branding and a lack of Information, Education & Communication (IEC) materials.

City of Johannesburg (Gauteng): Vaccine acceptance is increasing amongst the youth through school vaccinations. Integration of sports and vaccine support is proving to be a success in the uptake of the vaccine. Incentives are good

Harry Gwala (KZN): Vaccine mandates at tertiary institutions and businesses is increasing vaccine acceptance. People are also vaccinating because of concern about the fifth wave. There is a good response when vaccinators go to farms. School programs and Operation Phuthuma encouraged people to vaccinate. Peer youth programmes are improving through #KeReady on social media, national radio and community radio. Youth are encouraging others to vaccinate through social media.

Ilembe (KZN): People do not understand the need for boosters after being told they were fully vaccinated. Experience of mild disease amongst infected people lower need for vaccination. Vaccine uptake improves when health care professionals go door-to-door and more of this is required.

Umkhanyakude (KZN): Vaccine uptake increased when it was coupled with other health services such as TB and HIV testing and screening and nurses encouraged people to have the vaccine. Challenges include that many do not see the vaccine as a priority.

Namakwa (Northern Cape): Misinformation includes that undocumented foreigners will be arrested and repatriated if they come for vaccination and that one can stop wearing a mask after vaccination. The Covid vaccines are a means of birth control and cause infertility in both men and women. Challenges include low rates of consent for learners’ vaccines, and no petrol cards for DoH officials affecting transport. There is also a lack of Afrikaans material to explain boosters. Free or subsidized transport to vaccination sites and incentives would support take up.

Cape Winelands (Western Cape): There is overwhelming support from communities when we go door-to-door. A number of people came for first vaccines. There has been an increase in vaccinating 12 – 17 year olds and youth peer education has started to bear fruit. Increased involvement from municipal counsellors would improve community engagement.

Central Karoo (Western Cape): There is a rumor circulating in the Karoo that Jews in the region are undermining the Covid vaccinations by putting out misinformation. This is completely false. We regret any confusion or offense that an incorrect statement in a previous edition of this report may have caused. The reference to this in the previous report has been removed from the website.

Garden Route (Western Cape): Heavy rains affect uptake. People experiencing long Covid symptoms are too ill to return for follow up jabs. Poor understanding of the difference between the flu and Covid vaccines. An increase in Gender Based Violence, femicide and poor policing has shifted priorities from the vaccine to trying to fight for justice.

Swartland (Western Cape): Vaccine acceptance is increasing amongst elderly people and decreasing amongst young people who believe that Covid is over. Cannabis use also fuel disinterest in the vaccine. There is a positive response to community sites, and could be improved by free transport and incentives.

MISINFORMATION

MISINFO: ~~Monkey pox is the new Covid and is a scam to control or kill us and to make money.~~ **TRUTH:** monkeypox is not new but it has changed to allow it to spread widely. It is not the same as Covid – a different virus and different disease. See [here](#) and [here](#).

MISINFO: ~~Monkey pox only impacts gay people.~~ **TRUTH:** This is wrong. Most cases of monkeypox are not among the LGBT+ community. However, it is true that several cases have been identified with people who identify as gay or bisexual. We must be careful of creating stigma, especially when there isn't evidence to support the claim. Similar false rumours were damaging at the start of the AIDS epidemic. See [here](#) and [here](#).

MISINFO: ~~The J&J vaccine has been recalled because it is dangerous and ineffective.~~ **TRUTH:** The US Federal Drug Administration has said that there is a very low risk of thrombosis in some patients. They still advise that this vaccine should be taken if there are no alternative vaccines available. See [here](#) and [here](#).

MISINFO: ~~Vaccines side effects are being under reported and can kill you. The website 'SA Vaccine Adverse Events Reporting System' shows that 73 people have died from the vaccine in SA.~~ **TRUTH:** This claim is not supported by evidence. Most side effects are mild and self-resolving. See [here](#), [here](#) and [here](#). SA has an excellent adverse reporting mechanisms backed by evidence ([here](#)) for credible local site on adverse reactions. The SA Health Products Regulatory Authority has conducted extensive research and determined that no one in SA has died due to the Covid vaccine ([Here](#)).

MISINFO: ~~I have survived four waves of Covid already so I don't need a vaccine now to survive a fifth one.~~ **TRUTH:** Getting vaccinated helps you reduce your chance of getting Covid which is still highly contagious, prevents the spread of Covid to others, and helps to limit new variants emerging. See [here](#) and [here](#).

MISINFO: ~~Covid isn't that bad, so we don't need to be vaccinated.~~ **TRUTH:** While some people who get Covid can show no symptoms, vaccines are highly effective in preventing serious illness and hospitalisation. See [here](#) and [here](#).

MISINFO: ~~Only older people need to get vaccinated as they face the biggest risk of death from Covid.~~ **TRUTH:** While it is true that older people do have higher risk, it's important that young healthy people are also vaccinated, to increase overall immunity, limit the development of new variants and protect the more vulnerable, such as elders. See [here](#) and [here](#).

MISINFO: ~~Natural immunity is better than vaccine immunity and shows we don't need to be vaccinated.~~ **TRUTH:** Natural immunity does help protect you but it depends on when you had Covid, which variant and the strength of your immune system and overall health. Vaccines are effective at giving sufficient anti-bodies to protect you, which is why boosters are necessary too. See [here](#) and [here](#).

MISINFO: ~~Vaccines cause infertility and erectile dysfunction.~~ **TRUTH:** There is no evidence to support these claims. Covid however can impair sexual performance. See [here](#), [here](#) and [here](#). A fun new video is [Here](#).

MISINFO: ~~Covid booster vaccines are dangerous~~ **TRUTH:** There is no evidence to support this claim. The Covid boosters are the same drugs used in the previous injections. Boosters shots are normal practice for many immunisations. See [here](#) and [here](#).

MISINFO: ~~The prediction of a 5th wave of Covid shows that the pandemic is controlled by the government and is carefully planned to control the population.~~ **TRUTH:** This is an untrue conspiracy theory, and there is no evidence to support this. Predictions of the waves of Covid infections come from carefully considered epidemiological models, based on previous experience. See [here](#) and [here](#).

MISINFO: ~~Foreigners will be deported if they try and get vaccinated.~~ **TRUTH:** While vulnerable people especially may be fearful, anyone in South Africa can be vaccinated, regardless of nationality. No foreigner has been arrested or deported while getting vaccinated in SA. See [here](#) and [here](#).

MISINFO: ~~Vaccines are dangerous and cause “vaccine-acquired immunodeficiency syndrome” or “VAIDS”.~~ **TRUTH:** There is no evidence at all to support the claim of immunodeficiency being related to Covid vaccines. See [here](#) and [here](#).

MISINFO: ~~Covid vaccination requires long painful needles.~~ **TRUTH:** Covid vaccines may cause slight pain, like a poke or pinch for only for a few seconds. Very long needles are not used. See [here](#) and [here](#) for tips and advice on managing fear and pain.

MISINFO: ~~Vaccines contain a microchip to track movement and shut you down if you misbehave.~~ **TRUTH:** This is not true. It is a common conspiracy theory, but there is no evidence to support this claim. See [here](#) and [here](#).

MISINFO: ~~Pfizer’s own data shows over 1,291 side effects of the covid vaccine.~~ **TRUTH:** A report from 2021 did have a long list of potential side effects, but this was NOT side effects of their Covid vaccine. It was a list of potential side effects that the safety study was watching out for. The vaccine is safe and side effects mostly mild. See [here](#) and [here](#).

WHO Africa Infodemic Response Alliance (AIRA) & Viral Facts

AIRA is the Africa-wide initiative of the World Health Organisation, managing the infodemic of misinformation and communications overload related to Covid and vaccination. They produce the Viral Facts content responding to misinformation which can be used freely. Here are the latest [Viral Facts Africa](#) resources (please use them):

Key concerning Covid Trends and Viral Facts

- Flu cases registering positive for Covid tests
- Covid cases are being falsely reported
- Monkeypox narratives in African Media Environments

Pfizer Covid vaccine cancer risk ([Twitter](#), [Facebook](#))

Malaria vaccine development ([Twitter](#), [Facebook](#))

Flu and Covid vaccines ([Twitter](#), [Facebook](#))

Routine childhood vaccines ([Twitter](#), [Facebook](#))

Gavi, the Vaccine Alliance, vaccine resource pack ([Here](#))

Viral Facts Africa campaign countering vaccine hesitancy, with the UK Government ([Here](#) and [Here](#)).

PROPOSED ACTIONS FOR RISK COMMUNICATION & COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

- **Publicise the majority.** Everyone in SA should know that the majority of adults have had a Covid vaccine. This must be widely communicated through all media. If possible, the Minister of Health should hold a ministerial briefing to announce this milestone.
- **Monkey pox communication.** There is increasing concern and confusion about monkey pox, which has strange overlaps with fears about Covid. Information should be prepared explaining monkey pox and the differences from SARS-CoV-2.
- **Weekly messaging to all healthcare workers.** Information updates should be sent to all healthcare workers with relevant Covid and vaccine data, communications priorities, and responses to concerns and misinformation they might be asked about.
- **Information for pregnant women.** Reinforce public communication regarding the safety of the Covid vaccine for pregnant women and breastfeeding women.
- **Reinforce NPIs messaging.** Maintain the importance non-pharmaceutical interventions such as mask wearing and hand sanitising in healthcare facilities, and for the general public.

METHODOLOGY AND COLLABORATION

The Social Listening & Infodemiology team that produces this report is part of the Risk Communications & Community Engagement Working Group of the Department of Health. This report is compiled following the methodology of the WHO Africa Infodemic Response Alliance (AIRA, see [here](#)), the “Identify” stage. We pool information from the following:

- **SA National Department of Health**
- **Covid-19 contact centre:** Reports from the national call centre
- **Praekelt.Org:** NDOH Covid-19 WhatsApp system
- **WHO Africa Infodemic Response Alliance (AIRA)**
- **UNICEF:** digital analysis of content on Google, Twitter, YouTube and Facebook, and digital news
- **Red Cross:** Network of over 2,000 community volunteers reporting misinformation and concerns
- **Real 411 Media Monitoring Africa:** a mis- and disinformation reporting and debunking initiative
- **Covid Comms:** a network of communications specialists that produces information on the pandemic
- **DOH Free State & KZN:** Provincial Departments of Health
- **Community Constituency Front (CCF), Covid-19 Hotline, Health Systems Trust**
- **Centre for Communication Impact, Centre for Analytics & Behavioural Change, Section 27**
- **Medical Research Council, National Institute for Communicable Diseases,**
- **SA Vaccination and Immunisation Centre, HSRC, DG Murray Trust, Right To Care**
- **Universities of Johannesburg, Cape Town, Free State, Wits, Stellenbosch, Sefako Makgatho**

OTHER RESOURCES
SA Corona virus website Here
Real 411 to report misinfo Here

Other organisations involved Government Communications & Information Service, SA Council of Churches, Clinton Health Access Initiative, Heartlines, Children’s Radio Foundation, IPSOS, People’s Health Movement, and Business for SA, SA Minerals Council, Wits Reproductive Health & HIV Institute, UN Verified, HealthEnabled, Deaf SA, SA National Council for the Blind, Treatment Action Campaign and Disability SA.

This week’s report was written by Brenda Goldblatt, Charity Bhengu, William Bird and Peter Benjamin.

Contact:

Nombulelo Leburu, National Department of Health
Peter Benjamin, HealthEnabled
Charity Bhengu, National Department of Health

nombulelo.leburu@health.gov.za
peter@healthenabled.org
charity.bhengu@health.gov.za

082 444 9503
082 829 3353
083 679 7424