

South Africa Covid-19 & Vaccine Social Listening Report

25 July 2022, Report 59

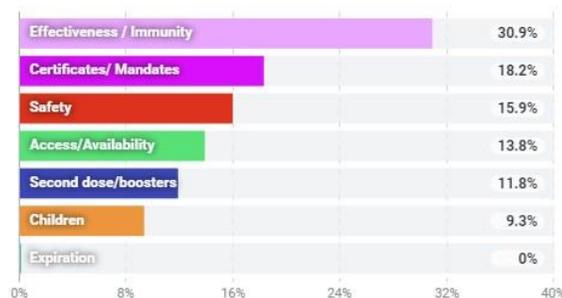
This is a weekly report of Covid-19 & vaccine sentiment, rumours & misinformation in SA. Further information that provides the background to this report is available [here](#).

KEY TRENDS

Concerning subvariants. There is widespread concern that the BA.5 Omicron subvariant of Covid-19 “*is more contagious and more resistant to vaccines than previous variants*”, according to a study ([Here](#)). More people are catching Covid-19 for the second or third time ([Here](#)). However, “*vaccine remains to be the good protection against dying, being hospitalized, or ending up on a ventilator*”. As Covid-19 virus variants evolve so do the symptoms, the latest being new “shape-shifting” BA.5 with new symptoms ([Here](#) and [Here](#)) and increased risk of diabetes and cardiovascular diseases ([Here](#) and [here](#)). Covid-19 reinfection has been described as a “silver lining” to tame the pandemic head immunity protection ([Here](#)) which doesn’t prevent infection or long Covid, but does dramatically reduce the severity of a Covid infection. Another concerning subvariant is known as Centaurus ([Here](#) and [Here](#)) BA.2.75, which has been detected in 10 countries.

Covid denial despite rising cases. There are growing trends denying that Covid-19 is still a problem in SA, “Covid is over”. Covid-19 is actually now rising again in SA, there has been an increase of 12.8% since the previous weeks, with the highest positivity rates detected in the Eastern Cape, Western Cape, and North West Provinces ([Here](#)).

Social media. There has been a decline in Covid-19 related conversations on digital news and social media platforms in SA. Google searches showed particular interest in “Vaccine enrollment”, “Can you fire employees who refuse vaccination?”, “Covid vaccine 4 weeks pregnant” and “Vaccination sites Johannesburg”. The most shared links in SA on Twitter were about Standard Bank’s vaccine mandate ending ([Here](#) and [here](#)). On digital news, top articles by engagement include Minister Phaahla contracting Covid-19 ([Here](#)), Covid hospitalisations rising in Europe ([Here](#)), Standard Bank ([Here](#)) and the ‘worst variant’ BA.5 being in SA ([Here](#)). Online conversations about Covid-19 vaccines in SA that generated most engagements in the past week are shown in the diagram.



Key hashtags related to Covid from Twitter, digital news and Facebook in SA (Word Cloud with 'sentiment' on vaccines shown from negative as red on the Left to positive as green on the Right)



Vaccination campaign continue. Despite widespread Covid fatigue and the view that 'Covid is not a threat' leading to low interest in vaccination, mobile pop-up vaccination sites are continuing in many areas of the country, such as Mpumalanga ([Here](#)) and Umlazi in KZN ([Here](#)). Faster coronavirus evolution has been detected in Europe and United States and Covid-19 hospital cases have surged in Australia ([Here](#)) presenting new challenges for science ([Here](#)). While it is wonderful that South Africa has lower Covid infections now, SA risks new waves of infection from other variants. Prof Salim Abdool Karim says, "Vaccines must become an essential requirement" ([Here](#)).

Mass Covid vaccination campaigns in African. The news of increased vaccination in Africa has been welcomed. Due to Covid-19 vaccination campaigns in 16 African countries in June, vaccination increased by three quarters in Africa ([Here](#)). There are 19 more mass vaccination campaigns July ([Here](#)).

Contested vaccination mandates. As some companies were facing pressure to reinstate workers who were fired for refusing to vaccinate ([Here](#)), the South African Communist Party (SACP) secretary-general, Solly Mapaila encouraged unions to continue playing an active role in encouraging workers to vaccinate ([Here](#)). Reverend Kenneth Meshoe, (ACDP) said while it was unconstitutional for the employers to force employees to vaccinate, "*The party believes that the vaccine should only be taken by those who want to vaccinate and condemns mandatory vaccination policies*" ([Here](#)). The University of the Free state has lifted their vaccine mandate policy and eased Covid-19 regulations ([Here](#)). Some religious organisations claimed that vaccine mandates are unconstitutional ([Here](#)).

Call for extended mask mandate. There are mixed sentiments about Health Minister Dr Phaahla's statement that a mask mandate must remain available in case of future coronavirus waves of Covid-19 ([Here](#)).

Monkeypox update. There is considerable concern in SA now that the WHO has declared that Monkeypox is a public health emergency of international concern ([Here](#)). In South Africa there have been three unlinked confirmed cases of monkeypox, with no deaths ([Here](#)). The cases have been in Gauteng, Western Cape, and Limpopo ([Here](#)). Public response measures were implemented for the close contacts ([Here](#)).

Vaccines and menstrual changes. A survey in April 2021 of more than 39,000 women said they bled more heavily than usual after their Covid vaccination. For those who do not regularly menstruate, breakthrough bleeding was reported ([Here](#)). Scientists are still

researching the implications of this, and other vaccines have been associated with menstrual irregularities (e.g. typhoid, hepatitis B and HPV).

Largest backslide in routine childhood vaccinations in decades. Though not widely known, there is considerable concern that the largest decline in childhood vaccinations in 30 years has been recorded globally ([Here](#)). The percentage of children who received three doses of the vaccine against diphtheria, tetanus and pertussis (DTP3) fell 5% between 2019 and 2021 to 81 per cent. In 2021, 25 million children missed out on one or more doses of DTP, leading to a growing number of children at risk from devastating but preventable diseases and polio outbreaks in many countries, especially in Africa ([Here](#)). SA has also felt the effects of Covid-19 reducing routine vaccination, mostly fuelled by misinformation leading to more parents who are opposed to Covid vaccines withholding their children from proven routine vaccinations.

Public health needs revitalising. In the last two years, some primary healthcare programmes took a “backseat” so catch-up programmes for the treatment of Tuberculosis are needed. There has been widespread approval of the call by Deputy President David Mabuza that the same urgency for combatting Covid-19 should be applied to defeat TB ([Here](#)).

MISINFORMATION

MISINFO: ~~Covid vaccines are not safe for children.~~ **TRUTH:** There is no evidence to support this claim. Several studies have found Covid vaccines to be safe for children. See [here](#), [here](#) and [here](#).

MISINFO: ~~Big banks and insurers have cancelled their compulsory vaccine mandate for employees because the vaccines don't work.~~ **TRUTH:** Standard Bank and several other companies have cancelled vaccine mandates. Standard says they now have over 90% of all staff vaccinated so there is no need for compulsory vaccination. There has also been pressure from trade unions to end vaccine mandates. This is not about vaccines not working. See [here](#) and [here](#).

MISINFO: ~~Now that Covid regulations been dropped there is no need to get vaccinated.~~ **TRUTH:** With the Covid regulations ending, vaccination is even more important. Covid-19 is still widespread and killing people every day. Vaccination is the main way to protect yourself and your family. It's still recommended to wear masks in indoor public spaces and to ventilate rooms. See [here](#) and [here](#).

MISINFO: ~~People who have been vaccinated are more likely to get seriously ill from Covid-19.~~ **TRUTH:** The evidence does not support this claim. People who have been vaccinated are far less likely to experience severe symptoms. See [here](#), [here](#) and [here](#).

MISINFO: ~~Vaccines cause infertility and erectile dysfunction.~~ **TRUTH:** There's no evidence to support these claims. Covid-19 however can impair sexual performance. See [here](#), [here](#) and [here](#).

MISINFO: ~~Monkeypox is just the new Covid-19 scam to control and or kill us OR monkeypox is the scam name for the side effects of the Pfizer Covid-19 vaccine.~~ **TRUTH:** Monkeypox is a viral disease and not an auto-immune disease, so it cannot be a side effect of a vaccine and the vaccines do not have any live virus in them. Monkeypox is not new but recently has mutated to be more contagious and has spread to SA. See [here](#) and [here](#).

MISINFO: ~~Vaccines side effects are being under reported and can kill you. The SA Adverse reactions site shows how many have died!~~ **TRUTH:** This is false. See [here](#), [here](#) and [here](#). SA has excellent adverse event reporting mechanisms backed by evidence (see [here](#) for a credible

local site on adverse reactions). The SA Health Products Regulatory Authority has conducted research and found that no one in SA has died due to Covid-19 vaccines ([Here](#)).

MISINFO: ~~Vaccines are dangerous and are linked to “vaccine-acquired immunodeficiency syndrome” or “VAIDS”.~~ **TRUTH:** There is no evidence at all to support the claim of immunodeficiency being related to Covid-19 vaccines. See [here](#) and [here](#).

MISINFO: ~~The only reason government is still pushing Covid vaccines is because they want to get rid of old stock.~~ **TRUTH:** Getting vaccinated is important to help limit variants developing and help prevent you and those close to you from getting seriously ill. Please ensure you are vaccinated. See [here](#) and [here](#).

MISINFO: ~~Ivermectin is an effective treatment for Covid-19.~~ **TRUTH:** The SA Health Products Regulatory Authority (SAHPRA) carried out a study into the use of Ivermectin and concluded that “there is currently no credible evidence to support a therapeutic role for Ivermectin in Covid-19”. They therefore ended the trial early. See [here](#) and [here](#).

MISINFO: ~~Text message saying “You have participated in a Covid drug trial and will get paid” ... if you do something.~~ **TRUTH:** These sorts of messages are scams. Participation in any legitimate clinical trial in South Africa requires informed consent, and any payments have to be approved by an ethics committee and usually only cover transport. They are never sent as a random text message from someone you don't know. See [here](#) for all the policies followed locally and [here](#) for informed consent.

MISINFO: ~~Garlic, sage, essential oils or muthi are better at prevention and curing Covid than vaccines.~~ **TRUTH:** While some use essential oils and garlic to regain smell there is no evidence to support claim that they can prevent people getting Covid or curing it. See [here](#) and [here](#).

MISINFO: ~~Covid vaccines require the use of long painful needles.~~ **TRUTH:** Covid vaccines may cause slight pain, like a poke or pinch, for only for a few seconds. See [here](#) and [here](#) for tips and advice on managing fear and pain.

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](#)).

Key COVID-19 Misinformation Trends

- Refuse a flu shot if you are vaccinated for COVID-19
- New COVID-19 Variants are Safe

Key concerning Disease Trends

- There is no proof of monkeypox cases in Africa

Here you links to the full list of the most recent **Viral Facts Africa productions:**

- Explainer: History of monkeypox ([Twitter](#), [Facebook](#))
- Debunk: Monkeypox doesn't exist ([Twitter](#), [Facebook](#))
- Debunk: Pfizer Covid vaccine causing monkeypox ([Twitter](#), [Facebook](#))

Gavi, the global vaccine alliance vaccine confidence resource pack ([Here](#))

PROPOSED ACTION FOR RISK COMMUNICATION & COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

Covid's not over – it's rising globally. South Africans should know that there is a significant risk that damaging waves of the Covid pandemic could return to SA, as is happening in many other countries. The best way to protect ourselves from this is through Covid vaccination.

Routine childhood vaccination. All children should receive the approved immunizations, it is crucial for their health and for the whole community. Messaging should go out widely that routine vaccination is as safe as it always has been and plays a major role in protecting children from terrible preventable diseases like polio.

Social listening for other health conditions. The RCCE partners should consider increasing the scope of social listening to infectious diseases like TB and HIV (and possibly monkeypox), mental health and other health concerns.

Digital and social media on misinformation. The RCCE partners should engage with platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, Tik Tok and Instagram to mitigate the spread of misinformation.

Prepare messaging on monkeypox. Monkeypox is not a major problem yet in SA, but it has the potential to be and messaging should be developed now to respond rapidly if needed in future.

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:** The national call centre
- **Praekelt.Org:** NDOH Covid-19 WhatsApp system
- **WHO Africa Infodemic Response Alliance (AIRA)**
- **UNICEF:** digital analysis of social & digital media
- **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-19 Comms:** a network of communications specialists producing 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

Background info for this report [Here](#)
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, 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.

Contributors to this report through inputs and participating in the weekly prioritization meeting: NDOH, Free State DOH, KZN DOH, NICD, UNICEF, Real411, University of Free State, Right To Care, Project Last Mile, Community Constituency Forum, Health Systems Trust, DG Murray Trust, and Covid Comms.

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