

South Africa Covid-19 & Vaccine Social Listening Report

19 August 2022, Report 63

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

KEY TRENDS

The single death linked to the Covid vaccine, may negatively impact vaccine uptake. The announcement two weeks ago of the first Covid-19 death in South Africa linked to the Covid-19 vaccine has caused some groups opposed to vaccination to post on social media that their concerns about the safety of vaccines were justified. The extremely rare ‘adverse event following immunisation’ that was responsible for the death makes this the first death to have occurred in South Africa despite more than 38 million vaccines having been administered in the country. Many are worried that these groups and their posts may negatively impact vaccine uptake ([here](#)). Concerns about vaccine safety, and perceptions of high vaccine risks continue, “even when the public believes vaccines are important for protection” ([here](#) and [here](#)).

Low vaccine uptake among the youth remains a challenge for South Africa. In the 18- to 34-year age group, about 38% (6.7 million) have been vaccinated, and vaccine uptake for those aged 12 to 17 sits at about 2.6 million. “Our big challenge at the moment is younger people. We really need to get more of them [vaccinated] before they become sitting ducks for long Covid,” said Nicholas Crisp, Deputy Director General in the National Department of Health ([here](#)). Vaccine coverage is higher in older people, at 71% (3.9 million) for those 60 years and older, and 66% (3.2 million) for those aged 50 to 59. A big challenge is vaccinating younger children ([Here](#)).

Social media. In the past week the following search queries on Google in SA greatly increased: “what happens if you get covid vaccine while positive”, “list of vaccines approved by WHO”, “how to get my vaccination certificate online”, and “Is the Covid vaccine safe”. Covid-related most shared links on Twitter in SA were about misinformation - Denmark’s changing guidelines for vaccinating children ([here](#)), misinformation on the dangers of the Covid vaccine ([here](#)) and untruths about many pregnant women miscarrying due to the vaccine ([here](#)). On digital news media in SA, the Covid-related articles most engaged with were estimate that 48% of employers complied with directives ([here](#)), anti-Pfizer misinformation ([here](#)), opposition to a vaccination drive in schools ([here](#)), report of a child’s arm injury following vaccination ([here](#)), and sharing technology and innovation is needed to end the pandemic ([here](#)). The word cloud below is based on analysis of content from digital news, Twitter and Facebook on Covid-related information in SA. These are the leading hashtags organized by sentiment towards vaccination, from negative red on the left to positive green on the right.



Confusion about where Covid-19 data can be found. Confusion about where Covid-19 data can be found seems widespread, since the reporting frequency for this information dropped to weekly (it had been daily

during the pandemic). This confusion is likely due to the latest data not being posted on the SA Corona Virus website, but all data can still be found on the NICD website ([here](#)).

Covid-19 vaccine boosters mostly taken by those traveling abroad. Uptake of booster doses of the Covid vaccines is important for the building of cellular immunity, however people taking booster doses remain very low in South Africa, with only about 3.6 million booster shots administered. The boosters are more widely taken by those embarking on overseas travel ([here](#)).

Mixed responses to the new variant-adapted shot. Britain, the first country to approve a coronavirus vaccine in late 2020, has now given the go-ahead to a variant-adapted shot that targets both the original and the Omicron version of the virus ([here](#)). Sentiments have been mixed with many positive responses ([here](#)), unfortunately coupled with some disinterest in any Covid-19 developments and some negativity about the continued focus on Covid-19.

A measles outbreak in Zimbabwe has killed 157 children with the death toll nearly doubling in just under a week and church gatherings being blamed for the surge ([here](#)). Rates of childhood vaccination decreased dramatically during the pandemic, putting more children at risk of catching and suffering serious consequences from these vaccine-preventable deadly diseases. South Africa also experienced a decline in routine vaccinations during Covid. Four cases of measles were confirmed in Gauteng this year, but there were no deaths ([here](#)).

Mixed sentiments around Monkeypox threat. Health Minister Dr Joe Phaahla has reported that a fourth case of monkeypox has been detected in the country. The patient is a 28-year-old man from the Western Cape who recently travelled to Spain ([here](#)). However, there is a sense of non-urgency around the Monkeypox threat. Many people on social media have dismissed Monkeypox as “a scam disease” and accused WHO of “pushing hard for the pandemic” using “scaremongering tactics” ([here](#)). Despite this, some are concerned that “America allowed 20 million vaccine doses to expire instead of giving them to the countries who needed them” and there have been prayers for God’s mercy ([here](#)). Others focused on the government’s “complacency” for “allowing the virus into the country”, and asked authorities to “close the borders” ([here](#)) and one comment was “Just keep him away from the rest please! Enough now” ([here](#)). While some people on Twitter speculated that Monkeypox was an STD adding that “95% of spread is through sexual contact” and that “it is harmful to pretend otherwise” ([here](#)), an expert tried to debunk this rumour, saying; “it spreads from close physical contact regardless of sexual orientation, and that stigmatizing the LGBTQ community by labeling them as the cause of the Monkeypox infection will not serve any good.” ([Here](#)).

Investigation into Covid-19 vaccine hesitancy. Misinformation related to the Covid-19 vaccines and their relationships to vaccine hesitancy and refusal has been carried out. In the study, it was found that 57.6% of the participants in one study reported being exposed to conspiratorial misinformation such as Covid-19 vaccines are harmful and dangerous ([here](#)). Misinformation and harassment by anti-vaccination groups in various countries has led to health services being closed ([here](#)).

New variant-adapted vaccine. There has been mixed sentiment in SA about the British approved variant-adapted shot that targets both the original and Omicron version of the virus ([Here](#)). Sentiments on SABC News included “we don’t need it here in SA, the vaccine plant is closing” due to low vaccine demand and “U just never give up, some of us don’t care about covid” ([Here](#)). Others were excited. “Just the kind of news I was hoping for” ([Here](#)) and ([Here](#)).

NICD recovered from Covid disruptions. The National Institute for Communicable Disease reported that managing the Covid-19 pandemic has hurt their capacity for other health issues, like the treatment of HIV/AIDS and Tuberculosis. A statement from the NICD said that, “Resources had to be redirected from other programmes in order to help fight the pandemic. Now, the National Institute for Communicable Disease says, nationally the screening and diagnosis of TB has recovered from Covid-19 disruptions” ([Here](#)).

Impact of the pandemic on women. The *British Medical Journal* has recently published an article describing that mRNA Covid vaccines are safe during pregnancy based on large-scale studies. A gradual increase in the vaccination rate has been observed among pregnant women during the Covid-19 pandemic ([here](#)).

Community health promotion around Covid continues. Among many other community level activities, several organisations including the Health Systems Trust hosted a clinic support day during youth month ([here](#)).

Covid-19 surveillance shows a drop in testing. The number of PCR tests performed was 19.4% lower than the number reported in the previous week, with the percentage testing positive sitting at 4.1%. The highest number of those testing positive was in Limpopo.

Economic recover after the global pandemic. President Cyril Ramaphosa announces that South Africa's most pressing priority is swift and equitable economic recovery. He said that, "South Africa's most pressing priority is a swift and equitable economic recovery that leaves no one behind, post Covid-19" ([here](#)).

MISINFORMATION

MISINFO: Denmark has banned giving COVID vaccine to children. **TRUTH:** Denmark has simply adjusted its guidelines as over 80% of population has been double vaccinated and also because children very rarely suffer serious illness from Covid-19. See [here](#) and [here](#).

MISINFO: Covid vaccines cause heart attacks and inflammation of the heart. **TRUTH:** While there have been some cases of inflammation of the heart (myocarditis), the risk is very low, see [here](#). There is no evidence to support claims that Covid vaccines directly cause heart attacks, see [here](#).

MISINFO: The Covid Vaccine death reported by SAHPRA is not the first in SA and hundreds more have died from being vaccinated. **TRUTH:** This is not true. This is the first verified case of death being directly caused by Covid vaccination in SA. The SA Health Products Regulatory Authority (SAHPRA) thoroughly assesses suspected cases, and this is the first verified case of vaccine-caused death in SA. It is certainly possible for someone to die after having a vaccination, but the events may be unrelated (e.g. like being hit by a car after having toast for breakfast – one follows the other but one did not cause the other). SAHPRA has been transparent about this, making the news public quickly. See [here](#) and [here](#).

MISINFO: People who have been vaccinated are more likely to get seriously ill from Covid-19. **TRUTH:** There is no evidence to support this claim. People who have been vaccinated are far less likely to experience severe symptoms. See [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 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](#).

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. The AIRA infodemic trends reports of misinformation throughout Africa are now hosted on the AIRA webpage ([here](#)). 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):

- EXPLAINER: Monkeypox self-management ([Twitter](#) and [Facebook](#))
- EXPLAINER: PHEIC ([Twitter](#) and [Facebook](#))
- DEBUNK: Ivermectin on essential medicines list ([Twitter](#) and [Facebook](#))
- SHORT: Childhood vaccine success ([Twitter](#) and [Facebook](#))

PROPOSED ACTIONS FOR RISK COMMUNICATION & COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

- **Increase knowledge of infectious diseases and vaccine benefits.** As public focus is moving away from Covid, there should be increased health communications on other infectious diseases such as polio and monkeypox. In particular, the role that immunization has played in reducing deaths from vaccine-preventable deaths should be stressed. Resistance in many adults to Covid vaccines is having the undesirable consequence that more parents are not having their children receive routine vaccination.
- **Integrating health misinformation with other public healthcare concerns.** Misinformation can spread and cause harm to health, similar to how infectious diseases spread. A national system that allows health professionals and others from the public to report health misinformation should be expanded, based on the existing National Covid contact centre and the Real 411 debunking system. All levels of the health system, including community health workers, should receive training in the importance and potential danger of misinformation and how to respond to it and report 'outbreaks'.
- **Reassurance around the vaccine death.** There is still considerable alarm following the confirmed death in SA as a result of Covid vaccination. The RCCE partners should increase communication around this – be clear that it is true that this happened for the first time in SA, that this shows the SA Health Products Regulatory Authority does investigate suspected cases, and offer reassurance that the vaccines are safe - after over 38 million vaccinations this is the first tragic fatality in SA, while over 100,000 have died from Covid-19.

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:

OTHER RESOURCES

Background to this report	Here
SA Corona virus website	Here
Real 411 to report misinfo	Here

- **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 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.

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