

# Why are South Africans afraid to vaccinate?

Conspiracy theories on social media are stoking the fires of fear around the Covid-19 inoculation, according to a [study](#) conducted with South Africans between 20 and 60, who self-describe themselves as vaccine hesitant



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The depopulation of Africa conspiracy theory was generating high levels of uncertainty. The belief that the vaccine could kill people or cause harmful side effects, combined with doubts about the efficacy of the vaccine, has left citizens feeling uncertain about whether to vaccinate.

Many say they prefer to watch and see how other people respond to the vaccine or rely on preventative measures such as hand sanitising, mask wearing and social distancing.

The danger of this hesitancy is that slow uptake of the vaccine makes it harder for the country as a whole to achieve herd immunity in the face of the pandemic.

The qualitative study revealed that while the country stands to benefit from mass vaccination (it will ease the pressure on the healthcare system, it provides an opportunity for the economy to recover), the personal benefits of vaccinating are less motivating.

The vaccine hesitant comment that the vaccine cannot guarantee prevention of contracting Covid-19, but only reduces the

risk of Covid-19 related death. With fears around potential side effects, they do not feel this is a risk worth taking.

Many distrust sources of information on vaccinating, with highest trust placed in medical experts and lower trust placed in the pharmaceutical companies and politicians as these latter sources are seen as having a vested interest.

Citizens are likely to feel reassured once individuals they know are vaccinated without suffering any adverse effects. Yet, it is harder task to convince them that the vaccine will effectively protect them against Covid-19.

## **What can be done to overcome this fear around being vaccinated?**

Communication needs to address fears around death and side effects. Here factual information can reassure, yet it is the persisting underlying fear that will need addressing as heightened emotions are not easily calmed using facts.

Information around efficacy is important. A challenge here is that vaccines from different manufacturers carry different levels of efficacy which muddies the water. Citizens need to know which vaccine they will be receiving, any potential side effects and the efficacy related to that vaccine.

The elderly, vulnerable communities and those with comorbidities require greatest assistance as their vulnerability increases levels of fear. Those with co-morbidities, for example, worry about how the vaccine will interact with their existing condition, and if there is any danger of additional side effects.

Practically, citizens want concrete information on roll out in their local area so that they know where to go and when they can expect to be vaccinated.

Any information sharing needs to take the income level of the citizen into account. Upper to mid income levels are likely to be looking for information online and want to make their own decision based on credible facts delivered by a reputable authority.

Mid to lower income levels express a preference for face to face community engagement, yet social distancing is preventing this type of community forum from taking place. Often these income levels are open to vaccinating out of economic necessity. They can neither afford to contract Covid, nor do they have access to effective healthcare resources.

These citizens are open to community messaging and may feel reassured if they are made aware of other community members who have been vaccinated safely with no adverse effects.

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