

Digital health passports should not be introduced until COVID-19 vaccines are available to all, report warns

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Digital health passports should not be introduced on a mass basis until coronavirus tests are available and affordable to everyone in the country, [a new report](#) warns. The same considerations apply to vaccines once these are approved and ready for widespread use.

Failing to address issues with the availability and affordability of tests and vaccines risks excluding already vulnerable populations from protection against the virus, according to the research. This could also restrict people's [legal rights](#).

Digital health passports, sometimes also referred to as 'immunity passports', are digital credentials that, combined with identity verification, allow individuals to prove their health status (such as the results of COVID-19 tests, and eventually, digital vaccination records).

The report also urges digital health [passport](#) providers to work to address any potential data privacy issues. It calls for policymakers to strike an adequate balance between protecting the rights and freedoms of all individuals and safeguarding public interests while managing the effects of the pandemic.

The research was carried out by Dr. Ana Beduschi, from the University of Exeter Law School and is funded by the Economic & Social Research Council (ESRC), as part of UK Research & Innovation's rapid response

to COVID-19.

The report warns that deployment of digital health passports may interfere with several fundamental rights, including the right to privacy, the freedoms of movement and peaceful assembly. It also warns that the use of digital health passports may have an impact on equality and non-discrimination. If some people cannot access or afford COVID-19 tests and vaccines, they will not be able to prove their health status, thus having their freedoms de facto restricted.

Dr. Beduschi said: "Digital health passports may contribute to the long-term management of the COVID-19 pandemic, but their introduction poses essential questions for the protection of data privacy and human rights. They build on sensitive personal health information to create a new distinction between individuals based on their [health status](#), which can then be used to determine the degree of freedoms and rights individuals may enjoy."

"Given that digital health passports contain sensitive personal information, domestic laws and policies should carefully consider the conditions of collection, storage and uses of the data by private sector providers."

"It is also crucial that the communities that have already been badly impacted by the pandemic have swift access to affordable tests and, eventually, vaccines. Otherwise, deploying digital health passports could further deepen the existing inequalities in society."

Multiple initiatives to develop and deploy digital health passports are currently underway in the UK and abroad, to facilitate the return to work, travel, and live-audience large sports events. The World Health Organisation (WHO) and Estonia have recently agreed to develop a digital vaccination certificate that could be used for COVID-19 once a

[vaccine](#) is available. Rapid antigen tests for COVID-19 are increasingly offered by private sector providers and results are often managed through digital platforms. Vaccine trials have shown promising early results, raising hopes for vaccine availability and widespread vaccination by next year.

The aim of the report is to inform decision-makers at an early stage, before large-scale deployment of digital [health](#) passports, about the risks they pose to the protection of these rights, and to recommend effective strategies for potential risk mitigation. The research analysed the existing legal framework, including UK laws, judicial decisions and international human rights law.

Provided by University of Exeter

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