

UK survey: Ethnic minorities less likely to take COVID jab

December 16 2020, by Sylvia Hui



In this Tuesday, Dec. 8, 2020 file photo, a nurse prepares a shot of the Pfizer-BioNTech COVID-19 vaccine at Guy's Hospital in London. Research released on Wednesday, Dec. 16 in the U.K. suggests that people from ethnic minority backgrounds or with lower incomes are less likely to take the coronavirus vaccine being rolled out in Britain. That has raised concerns about whether the jab would reach the communities that have been hit disproportionately hard by the pandemic. (AP Photo/Frank Augstein, file)

People from ethnic minority backgrounds or with lower incomes are less likely to take the coronavirus vaccine being rolled out in Britain, research suggested Wednesday, raising concerns about whether the jab would reach the communities that have been hit disproportionately hard by the pandemic.

A survey by Britain's Royal Society for Public Health said that while three-quarters of those polled would take a COVID-19 vaccine if advised to do so by a doctor, that figure fell to 57% among Black people and those from Asian and ethnic minority backgrounds.

The body also said the survey "revealed significantly more hesitancy among lower income groups"—with 70% of lowest earners likely to agree to the jab, compared to 84% of highest earners.

Public health experts and doctors say the findings are concerning, but unsurprising. They align with consistently lower uptake rates of other vaccines, like the measles and flu jabs, among ethnic minority communities and in poorer neighborhoods, they say.

That reluctance—a result of factors like public health messaging not reaching the communities and mistrust of authority based on past experiences—has been exacerbated by misinformation and anti-vaccination campaigns on social media.

"We have known for years that different communities have different levels of satisfaction in the National Health Service," said Christina Marriott, chief executive of the Royal Society for Public Health. "More recently we have seen anti-vaccination messages have been specifically targeted at different groups, including different ethnic or religious communities."

Britain on Dec. 8 became the first country in the world to roll out the

coronavirus vaccine developed by Pfizer and BioNTech, which has an efficacy rate of around 95%. The government is first targeting people over 80 and nursing home workers. About 138,000 people have received the first of two required jabs to date.

Studies in the U.K. and elsewhere have shown that Black people and ethnic minorities are more at risk of contracting and dying from COVID-19, as a result of genetic conditions such as diabetes as well as socio-economic circumstances such as living conditions and occupation. A report by Public Health England also said that structural racism and poor experiences of public healthcare made it less likely for some groups to seek care when needed.

Officials have not said they would prioritize Black or ethnic minority communities during the coronavirus vaccine rollout. Dr. Salman Waqar, general secretary of the British Islamic Medical Association, said it has been left up to individual health trusts to decide whether or not to vaccinate Black or minority health workers first.

"Effort should be put in to make sure these communities are vaccinated," he said. "(Officials) have left it for providers to make the decision on the ground, but it doesn't appear to show strong leadership from the authorities if they've left it open to interpretation."

Dr. Kiran Rahim, a pediatrician based in a poorer area of London with a high rate of vaccine refusal, said health officials need to do much more to engage and reach out to marginalized and minority communities.

She said that in the case of the children's nasal flu vaccine—which many Muslims refuse because it contains porcine gelatine—uptake significantly improved once authorities made an alternative option available.

"Many of us have lobbied for many years for a vegetarian version to be available, we were constantly met with resistance," she said. "When it comes down to public health, with a mass vaccination campaign going, you do have to engage with all parties."

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Citation: UK survey: Ethnic minorities less likely to take COVID jab (2020, December 16)
retrieved 24 April 2024 from

<https://medicalxpress.com/news/2020-12-uk-survey-ethnic-minorities-covid.html>

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