

Tears and fears as India's huge coronavirus vaccine push falters

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India's huge coronavirus vaccination drive is behind schedule, with a third of recipients not showing up for appointments because of safety fears, technical glitches and a belief that the pandemic is ending.

After one week, India has vaccinated 1.4 million people, or 200,000 people per day. It had initially hoped to process 300,000 per day before ramping up the rollout and inoculating 300 million by July.

At the Sharda Hospital in Greater Noida near New Delhi, pharma student Khushi Dhingra, 17, hugged a friend and wept as she waited to get her shot.

"I am very afraid. I hate needles and I am worried about side effects," she told AFP.

"My papa is very worried too. He is calling me again and again to make sure I am okay."

"There are about 80 students in my batch but only two have opted to get the shot," said nursing student Sakshi Sharma, 21, in Greater Noida.

"My friends are saying there will be [side effects](#), that you can even get paralysis."

India is using two shots for its drive.

One is Covishield, a locally produced version of the Oxford-AstraZeneca vaccine, which has been approved and safely used in a number of other countries after completing Phase 3 [human trials](#).

The other—Covaxin—was developed locally by Bharat Biotech and has not yet completed Phase 3 trials, though the government has insisted it is "110 percent safe".

WhatsApp worries

Side effects are a common fear, with a few cases of severe

reactions—and even deaths—reported widely in the media and circulating wildly on Facebook and WhatsApp.

In the eastern state of West Bengal, health chief Ajoy Chakraborty said that turnout was just under 70 percent, calling it "not encouraging".

"We could have achieved our target if some hadn't backed out after seeing television reports of adverse effects following immunisation," Chakraborty said.

But Alisha Khan, 20, a nursing student in Greater Noida, said people were also hesitant because of the "rushed" approval of Covaxin.

"Why are they trying to experiment on us? First, they should have completed trials in a proper way," Khan told AFP. "I am shivering already out of fear."

Coronavirus complacency

Dhingra, in the end, did not get a shot after staff realised she was under 18. She had, however, received a text telling her to come for the vaccination from the IT system managing the mammoth process.

The government says that this and other glitches are being ironed out.

One was that if a person did not show up for vaccination, someone else could not simply take their place.

This led to unfinished vaccine vials—which contain a certain number of doses and have to be used that day—being thrown away.

Also hurting the effort is complacency with the number of coronavirus infections and deaths in India falling sharply in recent months.

"In the beginning when there was lockdown, (villagers) were very scared of the [coronavirus](#)," said Asha Chauhan, 30, who is part of vaccination efforts in [rural areas](#).

"Now that fear has gone because cases have come down. They feel corona has gone from our country now," she said. "They fear they will die if they take the vaccine."

Selfie zones

Many of the 30 million people due for jabs in the first phase are [health workers](#) who have seen the deadly pandemic close up—yet many of them are hesitant.

This needs to be addressed before the vaccine is rolled out to the wider Indian population, experts say, where vaccine scepticism is already rife.

"They must launch awareness campaigns in every nook and corner of the country," said Anita Yadav, 25, an auxiliary nurse and midwife, told AFP.

The government has attempted to boost participation, even adapting a classic Bollywood song with lyrics telling people not to believe false rumours.

One Delhi hospital has set up a "selfie zone" for satisfied recipients to take photos. And vaccination centres have started playing light, soothing music in waiting rooms.

"All the top clinicians and doctors have taken the jab and we're pushing the videos of them taking the shot for circulation and it has been helping in overcoming any hesitancy," said Dr. Qazi Haroon, an immunisation officer in Kashmir.

"Now (inoculations) are picking up satisfactorily... Yesterday (Friday), we met 80-90 percent of our targets across vaccination stations."

Shahid Jameel, a virologist and academic, said that a country like India was bound to have teething problems.

"Once the frontline workers are given the jabs," Jameel told AFP, "confidence will slowly build up."

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