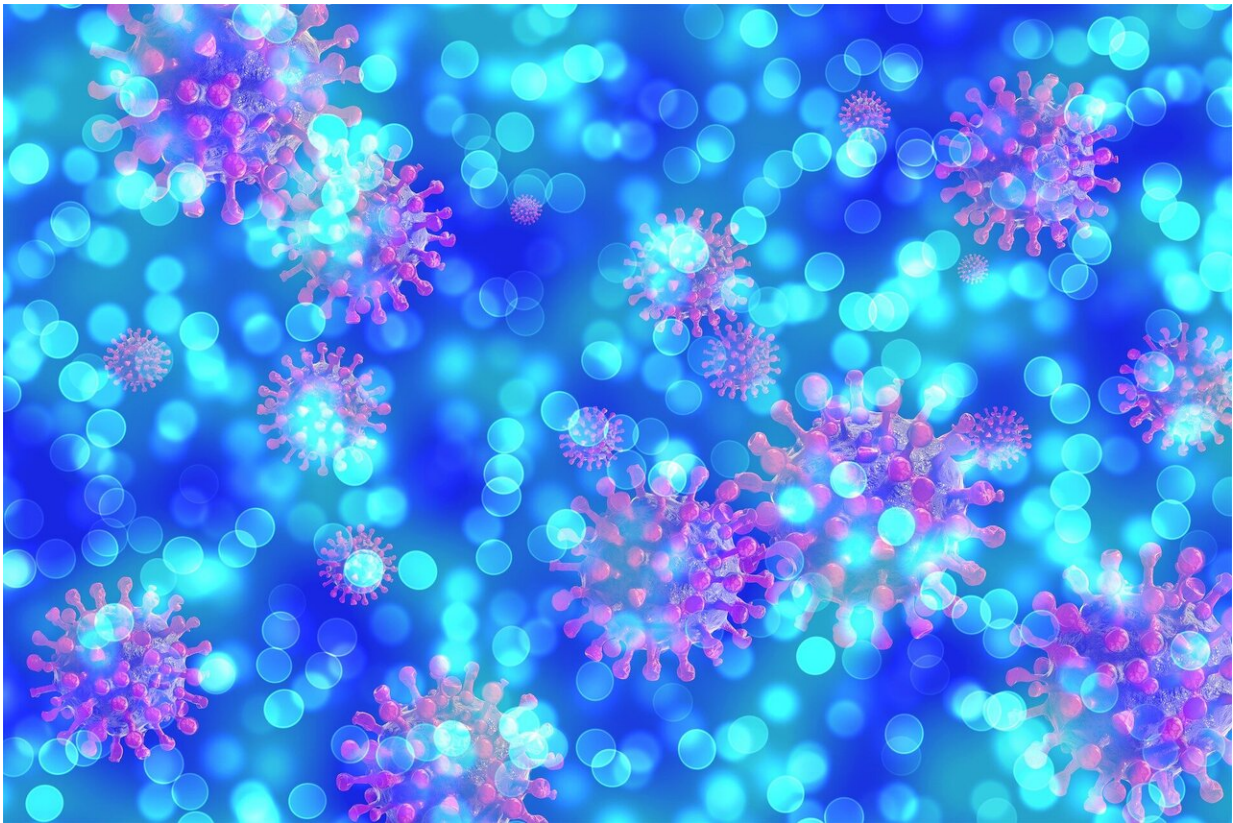


Belief in COVID conspiracies linked with vaccine hesitancy

February 2 2021



Credit: Pixabay/CC0 Public Domain

Low likelihood of accepting a coronavirus vaccine is associated with having "conspiracy suspicions" about the pandemic, a new study has found.

15% of the UK public believe that "reporters, scientists, and [government officials](#) are involved in a conspiracy to cover up important information about coronavirus"—but this almost triples, to 42%, among those who say they're unlikely to or definitely won't get vaccinated against the virus.

The study finds that this dynamic holds for belief in a number of conspiracy-related statements, and that people from BAME groups are also particularly likely to report believing such claims.

Relying on [social media](#) for a lot of your information about the pandemic appears to play a role, too, as well as being linked to greater levels of potential concern about getting vaccinated.

The research was carried out by the University of Bristol and King's College London, with the findings based on a survey of 4,860 UK adults aged 18-75 between 21 November and 22 December 2020.

Conspiracy suspicions and theories

Notable minorities of Britons have so-called "conspiracy suspicions" about the COVID-19 crisis, and these are especially widespread among those who are vaccine-hesitant. For example:

- 27% of the public believe "the real truth about coronavirus is being kept from the public," which rises to 64% among people who say they're unlikely to or definitely won't get vaccinated against the virus.
- 21% believe "an impartial, independent investigation of coronavirus would show once and for all that we've been lied to on a massive scale"—compared with 51% of the vaccine-hesitant who say the same.

Belief in more concrete conspiracy theories about the pandemic is also relatively common: One in five people in the UK believe "the authorities want us to think that coronavirus is much more dangerous than it really is" (20%) and that "the government is deliberately allowing vulnerable people to die" (19%).

How beliefs and attitudes vary by ethnicity

27% of ethnic minorities say they suspect that "reporters, scientists, and government officials are involved in a conspiracy to cover up important information about coronavirus"—almost twice as high as the 14% of people from white ethnic groups who say they suspect the same.

People from BAME groups (25%) are also twice as likely as white people (13%) to report believing "the only reason a coronavirus vaccine is being developed is to make money for pharmaceutical companies."

These kinds of beliefs may be contributing to uncertainty about getting a coronavirus vaccine among some BAME people:

- 41% of white people say potential concerns about how quickly a vaccine was developed would likely persuade them not to take it, compared with 58% of people from other ethnic groups.
- 41% of people from BAME groups say concerns about not wanting to overload their immune system would probably convince them not to get vaccinated—almost twice as high as the 22% of white people who feel the same.

These concerns are reflected in the finding that people from ethnic minorities (15%) are half as likely as those from white ethnic groups (31%) to say they would like to be vaccinated immediately.

The link with where people get their information

from

Those whose knowledge about coronavirus comes primarily from certain online sources, including [social media platforms](#), are significantly more likely to have conspiracy suspicions about the pandemic and think various conspiracy theories are true.

While 15% of the public overall think "reporters, scientists, and government officials are involved in a conspiracy to cover up important information about coronavirus," this view is held by much larger proportions of those who get a great deal or fair amount of their information on the pandemic from the search engine DuckDuckGo (50%), Instagram (43%), WhatsApp (40%), YouTube (37%), Bing (34%), Facebook (31%) and Twitter (29%).

Relying on such sources is also associated with far greater levels of potential concern about getting vaccinated.

For example, those who get a lot of their information from DuckDuckGo (63%), WhatsApp (55%), Instagram (54%) and YouTube (49%) are more than twice as likely as both the population overall (24%) and those who rely on traditional media sources (24%) to say they would probably be put off getting a coronavirus vaccine if there were concerns that it might overload their immune system.

Dr. Siobhan McAndrew, senior lecturer in quantitative social science at the University of Bristol, said: "Willingness to report agreement with conspiracy suspicions and beliefs is related to low trust in traditional authority sources—to the point that it constitutes a threat to public health. This is a real challenge for the campaign to ensure the highest possible COVID-19 vaccination rates. A high proportion of the public have been exposed to content that undermines trust in [coronavirus](#) vaccines and public health measures, often content intentionally tailored

to the fears and concerns of vulnerable groups. Such narratives undermining trust are widely and rapidly disseminated online. This is of urgent importance for public health communicators and social media companies alike, to ensure that positive, accurate and relevant messaging reaches the groups who need it most."

Dr. Daniel Allington, senior lecturer in social and cultural artificial intelligence at King's College London, said: "Social media platforms such as Facebook, YouTube, and Instagram have begun to take action on viral misinformation, but our findings suggest that they still haven't done enough to solve this very real problem."

Professor Bobby Duffy, director of the Policy Institute at King's College London, said: "While some beliefs might seem outlandish, conspiracy suspicions are far from harmless speculation—especially in the midst of a deadly pandemic. Our findings show that although conspiracy thinking is limited to a minority of the population—something which is important to emphasize—levels of belief are particularly high among certain groups, such as the vaccine-hesitant. Addressing this mix of underlying beliefs, misleading information and harmful behavior is a key public health challenge."

Technical details

Ipsos MORI interviewed a sample of 4,860 adults aged 16-75 in the United Kingdom between 21 November and 22 December 2020. Data has been weighted to the known offline population proportions for age within gender, government office region, working status, social grade and education. All polls are subject to a wide range of potential sources of error.

The "conspiracy suspicion" questions used in the survey were developed by psychologist Michael Wood as a way of accurately measuring

people's openness to conspiracy theories on any topic.

More information: Coronavirus conspiracies and views of vaccination: [www.kcl.ac.uk/policy-institute ... s-of-vaccination.pdf](http://www.kcl.ac.uk/policy-institute...s-of-vaccination.pdf)

Provided by King's College London

Citation: Belief in COVID conspiracies linked with vaccine hesitancy (2021, February 2)
retrieved 26 April 2024 from
<https://medicalxpress.com/news/2021-02-belief-covid-conspiracies-linked-vaccine.html>

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