

# Hong Kong vaccination drive struggles to gain public trust

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In this Monday, March. 22, 2021, file photo, Hong Kong Chief Executive Carrie Lam receives the second dose of the Sinovac Biotech COVID-19 vaccine at a Central Government office in Hong Kong. Hong Kong's sudden suspension of a COVID-19 vaccine developed by Pfizer and BioNTech is another blow to a vaccination program already struggling against a wall of public distrust. Hong Kong on Wednesday, March 24, 2021, suspended use of the Pfizer vaccine, distributed by Chinese pharmaceutical firm Fosun Pharma, after defective packaging such as loose vial lids and cracks on bottles were found in one of two

batches of the vaccine. (AP Photo/Vincent Yu, File)

Hong Kong's sudden suspension of a COVID-19 vaccine developed by Pfizer and BioNTech is another blow to a vaccination program already struggling against a wall of public distrust.

Hong Kong on Wednesday suspended use of the Pfizer [vaccine](#), distributed by Chinese pharmaceutical firm Fosun Pharma, after defective packaging such as loose vial lids and cracks on bottles were found in one of two batches of the vaccine.

For now, Hong Kong residents can only get the Chinese-made Sinovac vaccine, which is reported to have an efficacy rate of 62%, compared with Pfizer's 97%. Wariness toward the Sinovac shot has grown after seven people who were vaccinated with it died, though authorities say the deaths were not linked to the vaccine.

When the government launched the vaccination drive in February, 66-year-old Chan Yuet Lin was eager to get inoculated. A mainland Chinese immigrant in the semi-autonomous city, she hoped vaccination would help her eventually visit her family in the Chinese mainland, whom she had not seen since the pandemic began, without enduring onerous quarantines.

But after seeing reports on television that several people with [chronic illnesses](#) had died days after having the Sinovac vaccine, Chan decided against getting inoculated.

"I have [high blood pressure](#), high cholesterol and high blood sugar. Right now with my [health condition](#) I don't think I can get the shot, I will wait and see," she said, adding that she planned to seek her doctor's advice at

her next appointment.



In this Feb. 23, 2021, file photo, health workers look at a vial and a syringe while administering a dose of the Sinovac Biotech COVID-19 vaccine at a community vaccination center in Hong Kong. Hong Kong's sudden suspension of a COVID-19 vaccine developed by Pfizer and BioNTech is another blow to a vaccination program already struggling against a wall of public distrust. Hong Kong on Wednesday, March 24, 2021, suspended use of the Pfizer vaccine, distributed by Chinese pharmaceutical firm Fosun Pharma, after defective packaging such as loose vial lids and cracks on bottles were found in one of two batches of the vaccine. (Paul Yeung/Pool Photo via AP, File)

Since vaccinations began on Feb. 26, about 5.7% of Hong Kong's 7.2

million residents have gotten inoculated—a far cry from a goal of vaccinating 70%. The slow uptake trails Singapore's. It started giving COVID-19 shots just days before Hong Kong and has administered vaccines to more than 13% of its population of 5.7 million.

The government has expanded the range of people who can get the shots, allowing those 30 and above after initially prioritizing those 60 and older, and employees from essential industries. It is considering giving the shots to anyone older than 16.

Slow progress on vaccinations could slow the city's economic recovery. Hong Kong is still grappling with [coronavirus](#) outbreaks and stringent social distancing measures that are especially hard on bars, restaurants and the tourism industry. The jobless rate climbed to 7.2% in February, the highest level since 2004.

Hong Kong leader Carrie Lam and health officials are urging people to get vaccinated. They insist the shots, including the Sinovac vaccine, are safe. Hong Kong, a former British colony, relies heavily on tourism but has been closed to foreign visitors since March 2020 and Lam has said social distancing precautions and [border controls](#) can only be relaxed after most people have gotten the shots.

"If we can't control the epidemic, there's nothing we can do about the economy," she told lawmakers last week.

Hesitancy toward the vaccines partly reflects growing mistrust of the government, as Beijing has asserted growing influence following months of anti-government protests in 2019. Authorities have arrested and jailed dozens of pro-democracy activists under a tough new national security law.



In this Feb. 26, 2021, file photo, people line up to receive China's Sinovac COVID-19 coronavirus vaccine at a community vaccination center in Hong Kong. Hong Kong's sudden suspension of a COVID-19 vaccine developed by Pfizer and BioNTech is another blow to a vaccination program already struggling against a wall of public distrust. Hong Kong on Wednesday, March 24, 2021, suspended use of the Pfizer vaccine, distributed by Chinese pharmaceutical firm Fosun Pharma, after defective packaging such as loose vial lids and cracks on bottles were found in one of two batches of the vaccine. (AP Photo/Kin Cheung, file)

Some residents are worried by the seven deaths that occurred after Sinovac shots.

"According to the government, none of the deaths are related to the

vaccine. Most of the patients had cardiovascular conditions, so there must be some association, but the government seems to be trying to dissociate it," said Belinda Lin, a Hong Kong resident in her 30s.

"It's an issue of responsibility, the willingness to take responsibility – I haven't seen this yet," said Lin, who does not plan to get the vaccine as she says there is a lack of studies showing long-term effects.

"From what we've seen in the news so far it seems like people have more side effects from the (Sinovac) vaccine that's less effective," said Agnes Wong, a sales executive in Hong Kong who also had no immediate plans to get vaccinated.

Unease over the vaccines, which were developed in under a year using varying levels of clinical trials, are not confined to Hong Kong.

In Europe, reports of problems with blood clotting following the AstraZeneca shot raised concerns. So have questions over some of AstraZeneca's clinical data.



In this Wednesday, March 24, 2021 file photo, a notice of vaccine suspension, left, is placed as people queue up outside a vaccination center for BioNTech in Hong Kong. Hong Kong's sudden suspension of a COVID-19 vaccine developed by Pfizer and BioNTech is another blow to a vaccination program already struggling against a wall of public distrust. (AP Photo/Vincent Yu)

The number of people who have booked but failed to show up for their Sinovac vaccine appointments currently stands at around 20%, up from about 11% a week into the program. That compares with a 5% no-show rate for the Pfizer shot before those were halted.

Martin Wong, a professor at the Chinese University of Hong Kong, co-authored a survey published in January that showed only 37% of Hong Kong residents were willing to get a COVID-19 vaccine. He says the

technology used, a manufacturer's track record and reports of side effects can all affect willingness to get the shots.

The government has advised people with chronic illnesses to ask their doctors before getting the COVID-19 vaccines. That can be difficult for many underprivileged Hong Kong seniors, said Ivan Lin from the rights advocacy group Society of Community Organization.

"The public health system should be more proactive in providing advice," said Lin. "For many of these elderly, their long-term illnesses are taken care of by public hospitals where appointments take place every three months, so they are not able to get (timely) medical advice."

Policies that would reward people for getting vaccinated are essential, says Wong.

"New incentives may be required such as exemptions from certain travel bans or issuance of a certificate of vaccination that can be used for different purposes," he said.





Residents line up against Hong Kong's business district to get tested for the coronavirus at a temporary testing center for COVID-19 in Hong Kong on March 16, 2021. Hong Kong's sudden suspension of a COVID-19 vaccine developed by Pfizer and BioNTech is another blow to a vaccination program already struggling against a wall of public distrust. Hong Kong on Wednesday, March 24, 2021, suspended use of the Pfizer vaccine, distributed by Chinese pharmaceutical firm Fosun Pharma, after defective packaging such as loose vial lids and cracks on bottles were found in one of two batches of the vaccine. (AP Photo/Vincent Yu)

Lam, the city's leader, has said the government might considering such measures, such as relaxing certain social distancing restrictions. Hong Kong is also discussing with Chinese authorities on easing restrictions for travelers who are vaccinated.

That might work for some.

Bilal Hussain, a doctoral student at the Hong Kong Polytechnic University, signed up to receive his first shot of the Sinovac vaccine after learning that China had eased its policy to allow foreign workers and their families to apply for visas into the country.

Hussain's wife and 5-year-old son are in China. He hasn't seen them since January 2020.

"I'm hoping that maybe in the near future, China will open up their borders for students who have been vaccinated," he said.

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