

Google trends, the COVID-19 vaccine and infertility misinformation

July 13 2021



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Google searches related to infertility and coronavirus (COVID-19) vaccines increased by 34,900% after a pair of physicians submitted a petition questioning the safety and efficacy data of the COVID-19 Pfizer vaccine. Referencing the petition, anti-vaccine activists circulated claims that misconstrued the information regarding the possibility that the vaccine could impact fertility in women.

The inaccurately represented information spread rapidly on social media channels, potentially influencing [public perception](#) and decision-making among pregnant patients or those seeking to become pregnant, according to research published in the *Journal of Osteopathic Medicine*. This happened despite the fact that the European Medicines Agency (EMA) and the US Food and Drug Administration issued emergency use authorization for the vaccine, deeming the concerns in the petition insignificant.

"Misinformation is a significant threat to healthcare today and a main driver of vaccine hesitancy," said Nicholas Sajjadi, a study researcher and third-year osteopathic medical student at Oklahoma State University College of Osteopathic Medicine. "We're seeing well-intentioned research and concerns taken out of context to stoke fear and anxiety about vaccination."

The making of a misinformation campaign

On December 1, 2020, Drs. Wolfgang Wodarg and Michael Yeadon

petitioned to withhold emergency use authorization of the BNT162b2 mRNA vaccine for COVID-19 manufactured by BioNTech and Pfizer. The petitioners raised unfounded concerns that female infertility could arise from vaccine-induced antibodies. It is important to note that the petitioners acknowledged the absence of any evidence associating female infertility risks with COVID-19 vaccines.

Anti-vaccine advocates seized on this concern to create a [misinformation](#) claim misrepresenting the EMA petition, and the public turned to Google to understand if the information was legitimate. At peak interest, the Google search terms "infertility," "infertility AND vaccine," and "infertility AND COVID [vaccine](#)" experienced increases of 119.9%, 11,251%, and 34,900%, respectively, when compared with forecasted values.

"I'm disappointed this misinformation occurred, but I am pleased to see spikes in searches because it reflects genuine interest and suggests that people are doing their research and trying to make informed decisions," said J. Martin Beal, DO, an OB-GYN with Tulsa OB-GYN Associates. "What I'd like to emphasize to patients is that your doctor would love to have this conversation with you to help clarify any questions or concerns you may have. Additionally, I highly encourage getting vaccinated—it will protect you and the baby."

Support for COVID-19 vaccination during pregnancy

The American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists currently recommends that COVID-19 vaccines not be withheld from pregnant patients who meet criteria for vaccination based on priority groups recommended by the Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices and those at increased risk for COVID-19 acquisition, such as women healthcare workers.

"Dispelling misinformation and informing patients about the risks and benefits of COVID-19 vaccination, or other misrepresented claims, can save lives and slow the spread of disease," said Sajjadi. "In the battle to fight misinformation, Google Trends can be an effective tool to help physicians recognize and proactively address false claims with patients."

More information: Nicholas B. Sajjadi et al, United States internet searches for "infertility" following COVID-19 vaccine misinformation, *Journal of Osteopathic Medicine* (2021). [DOI: 10.1515/jom-2021-0059](https://doi.org/10.1515/jom-2021-0059)

Provided by American Osteopathic Association

Citation: Google trends, the COVID-19 vaccine and infertility misinformation (2021, July 13) retrieved 13 March 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2021-07-google-trends-covid-vaccine-infertility.html>

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