

Anti-vaccine bastion France warily eyes COVID shots

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France was once home to the father of immunisation, Louis Pasteur, but it is now among the most vaccine-sceptic nations on Earth—a pressing concern as it prepares one of the biggest vaccination campaigns in its history.

Britain's announcement on Wednesday that it was approving a COVID-19 vaccine for general use piled pressure on other countries to shield their citizens from a virus that has killed nearly 1.5 million people worldwide.

French President Emmanuel Macron had already said he was aiming to begin inoculating those most exposed to the virus in early 2021, followed by a second phase targeting the wider public between April and June.

But he faces a tough task to persuade enough people to get the jabs to achieve herd immunity—the threshold at which the entire population is protected from the virus.

Risks 'exaggerated'

A survey in Le Journal du Dimanche newspaper at

the weekend showed only 41 percent of the French planned to get inoculated, compared with the 58 percent recorded in a recent Gallup poll in the US, where coronavirus and vaccine scepticism is also high.

Macron rejected a call from Greens leader Yannick Jadot to make the jab compulsory, saying he hoped to win over people with "conviction" and "transparency" instead.

Richard Lamette, a 65-year-old Paris-based plumber, told AFP he had no plans to get the COVID shot "until it has been well tested on the population".

Remarking that several of his admittedly younger colleagues had contracted the virus but recovered within 10 days, he said he felt that the dangers had been "a bit exaggerated".

"Other diseases kill far more people, like cancer and cigarettes and they don't make as much of a fuss about them," he argued.

'Yellow vest' influence

Long reputed as a nation of pill-poppers with one of the world's highest rates of use of antibiotics and antidepressants, the French have in recent years grown increasingly suspicious of the pharmaceutical industry.

The anticapitalist "yellow vest" protest movement that erupted in opposition to fuel taxes in late 2018 amplified [conspiracy theories](#) about the government being beholden to drug companies—theories that were fuelled by the increase in the number of compulsory jabs for children from three to 11 in 2018.

A Gallup survey of 140,000 people in 44 countries showed the French to be the most vaccine-sceptical in the world, with one in three saying they

did not believe vaccines to be safe.

The Journal du Dimanche poll showed the scepticism strongest among supporters of far-right and far-left political parties.

Health experts say [public trust](#) in inoculations began to erode after a 1980s scandal when hundreds of haemophiliacs were infected with HIV after receiving tainted transfusions.

Revelations in 2009 that a popular slimming drug Mediator caused serious heart damage and may have killed over 2,000 people further deepened the suspicion of [drug companies](#).

Swine flu fiasco

Many French people also frown on mass vaccination campaigns after a drive in 2009 against swine flu ended with the state incinerating millions of superfluous jabs, costing hundreds of millions of euros.

For Jocelyn Raude, a professor at the EHESP School of Public Health in Rennes, the [swine flu](#) affair marked a shift in [public opinion](#).

A number of doctors and pharmacists led by surgeon Henri Joyeux, based in the southern city of Montpellier, began to beat the anti-vaccine drum.

Joyeux, who has 175,000 followers on Facebook, "gave the (anti-vaccine) movement credibility", Raude said.

On his website the doctor likens the race for a COVID jab to the arms race between the US and the Soviet Union.

Geographer Lucie Guimier, who did her thesis on the anti-vaccine movement, noted it was strongest in Marseille, home of Didier Raoult, the professor who touted the anti-malaria drug chloroquine as a cure for coronavirus

"The idea has taken root that it's a rebel city against the central state. It's quite dangerous in terms of public health," she said.

Marseille deputy mayor Samia Ghali is among the sceptics.

Accusing the government of bungling its response to the [coronavirus](#) pandemic Ghali told BFMTV in September she did not "want to serve as a guinea pig" for a COVID-19 shot.

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