



**Rooted in Trust** is a global and local humanitarian response by Internews that aims to combat the spread of rumours and misinformation around COVID-19 in Lebanon. Internews, in collaboration with Maharat Foundation, are collecting rumours through social media monitoring in an effort to combat misinformation and to provide vulnerable communities with accurate information.

Internews and Maharat collected and analyzed 433 rumors about COVID-19 circulating on social media between December 10, 2020 and January 4, 2021. This bulletin highlights community perceptions and criticisms about the following topics:

- Influencers and their perspectives on the COVID-19 vaccine circulating on social media.
- The COVID-19 vaccine considered as deadly.
- Unapproved medications and home remedies for COVID-19.
- Concerns around the new strains of COVID-19, which triggered new questions around transmission and the vaccine's effectiveness against it.

## COVID-19 SITUATION IN LEBANON

As of January 19, Lebanon reached a new stage in the COVID-19 pandemic with a total of 255,956 cases to date and 1,959 deaths from the disease according to the World Health Organization.(1) Additionally, hospitals are no longer able to accommodate the growing number of patients due to the depletion of resources and limited bed availability.

This surge in cases has led the government to impose a total lockdown starting from January 14 and lasting until February 8, with the aim of limiting the worrying spread of the virus. Additionally, Lebanon's land and sea borders will be closed, and the country's airport will be operating at low capacity.

**Ministry of Public Health (MOPH)**

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**Hotline 1787**  
*(For any matter related to COVID-19 including access to services, testing, and quarantine options. This hotline is not free of charge, standard call rates apply for the time being).*

**World Health Organization**

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**01-612970 | 01-612971  
01-612972**  
*(For COVID-19 inquiries related to symptoms and testing facilities)*

**Endless Medical Advantage NGO**

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**76 864 721**  
*Conducting home and tent visits during the lockdown to people in Bekaa valley and El Marej areas to provide basic health services and some COVID-19 services. Also providing oxygen tank set-ups for in-need COVID-19 patients.*

**Lebanese Red Cross**

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**140 Emergency Hotline**  
*For Infection, Prevention and Control (IPC) Kits.*

**UNICEF**

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**70-582964**  
*For Infection, Prevention and Control (IPC) Kits.*

**NEXTCARE -UNHCR partners**

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**01-504020**  
*For medical emergencies including hospital*



## WHAT'S IN A RUMOUR?

Rumors are information collected from a first-hand source within the community which could take the shape of a question, criticism, or general comment about a situation or topic. In this bulletin, rumors were collected as data points pulled from social media pages by Internews and Maharat from December 10, 2020 to January 4, 2021 across various platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and WhatsApp.

For more details as to where you can access health care, consult any COVID-19 concerns, contact the above numbers.

## RUMOUR #1

Rumors about the safety of the vaccine have been circulating over social media, and influential Lebanese figures with large followings have been voicing their opinions on the vaccination.

ANSWER

Influencers and famous people on social media play a huge role in cultivating people's perspectives on a wide range of issues and their opinions are idolized by many people. However, not everything that these stars share is true, so fact checking is recommended prior to believing and re-sharing any post.

Vaccines work by training and preparing the body's immune system to recognize and fight off the viruses and bacteria they are designed to target. COVID-19 vaccines will not stop individuals from coming into contact with the virus but will help the body fight off the virus in question if contact is made, therefore reducing further spread within the community. Being vaccinated increases the likelihood of immunity from a virus, thus decreasing its spread and protecting the community as a whole. Public health authorities recommend that 95% of the population of any given country are vaccinated to ensure adequate community immunity.(2)

All COVID-19 vaccinations that will be rolled out in Lebanon have gone through all the necessary preclinical and clinical trials before being authorized for emergency use. Lebanon will be receiving the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine which has met all safety requirements of the American Food and Drug Administration (FDA) and WHO, and is already being used in other countries.

For example, singer Carol Samaha who has more than 4.8 million followers on Twitter, revealed on her Twitter page that she is anti-vaccination and posted a series of controversial tweets about vaccines using #no\_vaccine hashtag.

*For more information about the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine, check out Internews' FAQ document by scanning the QR code on the last page using your phone camera.*

## RUMOUR #2

Rumors suggesting COVID-19 vaccine is deadly have been circulating over social media. An increasing number of people are raising their concerns about the risks associated with getting vaccinated.

ANSWER

According to the FDA, six of the 44,448 people participating in the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine trials died during the trial period. However, of the six deaths, only two people had been given the vaccine, while the remaining four were given a placebo solution of salt and water. Both participants who died after receiving the vaccine had pre-existing health conditions and were over 55 years old. (3)

Health workers who will be deployed by the MOPH, WHO and partners to administer the vaccines in Lebanon will be trained to monitor the side effects and address them accordingly. It is also important to note that the Center for Disease Control Prevention (CDC) has published a list of at-risk population groups who should not receive the vaccine.(4) This includes people who have previously suffered from allergic reactions caused by any of the ingredients used in the vaccine.

Most medical treatments usually trigger some side effects, and these can range from minor manifestations to more serious adverse reactions. Scientists must weigh the impact of the treatment against its potential side effects when deciding whether a treatment is safe enough to use. The FDA stated that there are some side effects resulting from the use of the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine including: tiredness, chills, headaches, muscle pain, and small pain in your arm where the injection is administered (5). The WHO have mentioned that it is not possible to predict which individuals might suffer from mild or serious reactions due to a vaccine, stressing that even effective vaccines may produce some undesirable side effects that are mostly mild and tend to clear up quickly.

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Nisreen Tafesh, a Syrian actress and singer who has more than 8 million followers on Twitter tweeted that "6 people who have taken the COVID-19 vaccine have died, and 4 out of the 6 took a placebo vaccine." She even used the hashtag #have\_we\_become\_lab\_rats

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## RUMOUR #3

Social media monitoring activities show that false treatments including medications and home remedies for COVID-19 are still being circulated in Lebanon.

Speculations over the use of home remedies and certain medications to treat COVID-19 have been circulating on social media since the beginning of the pandemic. Some of these rumors were even spread by doctors and health professionals themselves. Alleged treatments include: lemons, oranges, donkey's milk, onion, garlic, and apple cider vinegar. Medications like Azithromycin, Chloroquine, and Ivermectin that have not been medically proven to treat COVID-19 have also been widely circulated, claiming efficiency against the virus.

It is important for communities to know that even health professionals can sometimes spread false information. For example, when fact-checking the information linked to the medications that are believed to be viable treatments to COVID-19, we quickly find that:

- Azithromycin is an antibiotic. Antibiotics do not work against viruses, only on bacterial infections. COVID-19 is caused by a virus, so antibiotics will not be helpful to treat it. It is sometimes used by doctors to treat bacterial infections resulting as a complication from COVID-19, but not COVID-19 disease itself. The use of antibiotics without a doctor's advice could weaken the immune system or interact negatively with other medication.
- Chloroquine is used as a preventative for malaria. After the deaths of some COVID-19 patients given this medication, the FDA issued a warning against its use for COVID-19.(6)
- Ivermectin is a medication used to treat many types of parasite infestations such as head lice. A study done in vitro showed that this medication has the ability to inhibit the replication of the COVID-19 virus. However, this has not yet been tested on humans and its side effects remain unknown.(7)

While some of these medications are indeed used by doctors, they are certainly not proven treatments for the COVID-19 virus. Complications differ from one patient to another, and qualified health professionals should be consulted first.



"In my personal experience with dozens of Corona patients, the drug Ivermectin proves day after day its effectiveness and excellent results in helping patients recover quickly and effectively. This drug has been effective in many studies conducted in Australia, India, and Pakistan."

Posted by a Lebanese doctor on his Twitter account, 101 likes, 13 comments, 13 retweets.



## RUMOUR #4

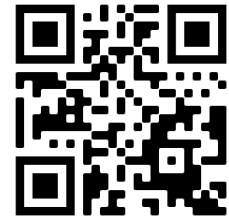
Rumors linked to the new strains of COVID-19 have been circulating on social media with increasing concern about their potential effects on children, and the effectiveness of the COVID-19 vaccines against these mutations.

Although the new strains of COVID-19—particularly those coming out of South Africa and the UK--might be slightly more contagious, they do not appear any more likely to trigger severe symptoms or death. There are no indications that these new variants are biologically different in ways that would require any change in current recommendations aimed at limiting the spread of the virus such as wearing masks and social distancing.

According to Johns Hopkins University, there is not enough evidence yet that suggests children are more susceptible to new variants. The data shows that children are being infected by old variants, as well as new ones.(8) As for the vaccine, experts claim that there is no reason to believe they won't be effective against new variants, due to the nature of how vaccines work. Previous vaccines have shown to be effective against mutations in diseases like oral polio, inactivated polio, measles, and yellow fever.

**"The new Corona strain carries mutations that enable it to affect children as well as adults, unlike the original strains that did not kill the young"** Posted on a Facebook group

**Read Internews' Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ) Document about the vaccine in Lebanon and other bulletins by scanning the QR code:**



## SOURCES

- (1) WHO COVID-19 Dashboard Lebanon, <https://covid19.who.int/region/emro/country/lb>
- (2) <https://vaccination-info.eu/en/vaccination/benefits-vaccination-community>
- (3) <https://www.fda.gov/media/144245/download#page31>
- (4) <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/vaccines/different-vaccines/Pfizer-BioNTech.html>
- (5) <https://www.fda.gov/media/144414/download>
- (6) FDA, FDA cautions against use of hydroxychloroquine or chloroquine for COVID-19 outside of the hospital setting or a clinical trial due to risk of heart rhythm problems, <https://www.fda.gov/drugs/drug-safety-and-availability/fda-cautions-against-use-hydroxychloroquine-or-chloroquine-covid-19-outside-hospital-setting-or>
- (7) FDA, FAQ: COVID-19 and Ivermectin Intended for Animals, <https://www.fda.gov/animal-veterinary/product-safety-information/faq-covid-19-and-ivermectin-intended-animals>
- (8) <https://www.hopkinsmedicine.org/health/conditions-and-diseases/coronavirus/a-new-strain-of-coronavirus-what-you-should-know>
- (8) <https://www.hopkinsmedicine.org/health/conditions-and-diseases/coronavirus/a-new-strain-of-coronavirus-what-you-should-know>