Introduction to Rooted in Trust

Rooted in Trust (RiT) is a USAID Bureau of Humanitarian Affairs (BHA)-funded project run by Internews to support humanitarian and public health agencies combat and manage the spread of rumors and misinformation about COVID-19. (1) The project was recently re-launched in September 2021 with its second chapter (RiT2.0) expected to run until end of 2022. In this bulletin, Internews profiles commonly occurring rumors across social media sites and offline through our partners’ activities in Lebanon between 1 and 31 April 2022. Our partners “Endless Medical Advantage” are active in engaging both the Syrian & Lebanese communities in the Bekaa region, and “Maharat” engage with different communities of all nationalities living in all regions of Lebanon. During this period, 52 rumors were collected from Facebook, WhatsApp, Twitter, and Instagram, in addition to private groups and accounts that have a relatively high user engagement. An additional 224 rumors were collected offline through aimed activities conducted by our partners, with the goal of reaching populations and groups that are less active online and who get their rumors through word of mouth.

2 unique rumors were subsequently selected for this bulletin which fall under the recurring themes of “Death”, “Vaccine”, “Hoax”, “Access and Affordability”, and “Treatment/Cure.”

COVID-19 situation overview in the country

Lebanon has seen 3,825 new cases over the period spanning the 10th till the 29th of April, with one new death, (2) and with the virus spreading more prominently among young adults aged 20 to 29. (3) There are 337 ICU beds available for the COVID-19 response across Lebanon with an occupancy rate of 4% and Lebanon is now situated in Level 2 of community transmission. (4) High vigilance continues to be recommended with a focus on abiding by public health and social measures and increased vaccine coverage. (5) Vaccine roll-out now includes people of all nationalities living in Lebanon, including Syrians, Palestinians, and migrant workers, even if their residency documents are not up to date. People still excluded from the COVID-19 vaccine roll-out campaign are children under the age of 11 years old.

When it comes to immunization for various vaccine-preventable diseases, due to the COVID-19 epidemic and the difficulty of transportation, awareness of the importance and priority of taking other available vaccines has decreased. At the national level, there is a decrease in immunization by thirty percent, after Lebanon crossed the 90% threshold in terms of immunization, it is now at 60% or less. These vaccines are available free of charge for all nationalities in all primary care centers of the Ministry of Public Health despite the acute crisis, thanks to cooperation with international partners such as the World Health Organization and UNICEF.
Important Numbers and Helplines:

- MOPH Hotlines: Corona 1787 | Vaccine 1214 (both free)
- COVID-19 call center 01-594459
- Airport Quarantine Section 01-629352
- Preventive Medicine Center 01-843769 | 01-830300
- Epidemiological Surveillance Unit 01-614194 | 01-614196
- WHO Lebanon 01-612970/1/2
- WHO Lebanon COVID-19 information page (moph.gov.lb)
- WHO Refugee and Migrant Health Fact sheet (https://covid19.who.int)
- WHO Refugee and Migrant Health Q&A (https://covid19.who.int)
- WHO Lebanon website (www.who.int/ar)

Methodology

We collect our data manually from social media, digital engagement activities, face-to-face (offline) data collection, data from local media, and rumor data collected from other humanitarian organizations. Qualitative data is collected by both digital and physical means through public and private social media groups and conversations and listening groups/private networks, respectively. We analyze our data focusing on rumors, themes, trends, level of engagement, and frequency/level of risk.

Practical Resources

- WHO dashboard (https://covid19.who.int)
- Protect yourself (English/Arabic) (https://covid19.who.int)
- Q&A (English/Arabic) (https://covid19.who.int)
- WHO Lebanon website (https://www.who.int/ar)
- MoPH Lebanon COVID-19 information page (moph.gov.lb)
- WHO Refugee and Migrant Health Fact sheet (https://covid19.who.int)
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Sahatona App

Efforts are being put in place to stop vaccine-preventable disease outbreaks in Lebanon. It is the first vaccination mobile application designed to help keep parents and caregivers well informed on their children's immunization and ensure their timely follow up on upcoming essential routine vaccines, provided for free in sponsored centers, as per the national immunization calendar. Sohatona app is available free of charge in Arabic language for all types of smartphones. It collects no personal information about the users. (6)

Demonstration Video of the App & how it works: https://youtu.be/wwfbJoX6HfE (Available in Arabic with English Subtitles)
A recent study finds that Syrian refugees in Lebanon recognized three types of barriers in accessing quality healthcare services: 1. Financial: high costs of healthcare, especially services not covered by the government or third-party organizations. 2. Structural: difficulty of transportation, long waits at facilities, and complicated referral systems. 3. Social barriers: perceived discrimination.

According to the non-profit organization Anera, public health interventions have been scarce across refugee camps since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic. Consequently, COVID-19 deaths were elevated among Syrian and Palestinian refugees in Lebanon, with a fatality rate that is four times and three times the national average, respectively.

All of this can lead to unwillingness to seek medical care until their health deteriorates severely to life-threatening cases, making room for such rumors as the one above to prosper. The above mentioned factors contribute to the proliferation and believability of this type of rumors among the Syrian communities.

In reality, a higher percentage of Syrians are dying not because of vaccine side-effects, nor are they being targeted in hospitals for lethal injections, but they do face obstacles to healthcare that push them away from seeking it until they have already reached critical and dangerous health situations.

As of 8 April 2022, WHO has evaluated that the following vaccines against COVID-19 have met the necessary criteria for safety and efficacy: AstraZeneca/Oxford vaccine, Johnson and Johnson, Moderna, Pfizer/Biontech, Sinopharm, Sinovac, COVAXIN, Covovax, and Nuvaxovid. Right now in Lebanon, both the Pfizer and the Moderna vaccines are available through MoPH vaccination centers, which the MoPH ensures that they are safe for use and within their expiry dates.

An official statement from the MoPH issues that “There are strict precautions in place to help ensure the safety of all COVID-19 vaccines. Before receiving validation from WHO and national regulatory agencies for emergency use, COVID-19 vaccines must undergo rigorous testing in clinical trials to prove that they meet internationally agreed benchmarks for safety and efficacy.”

Among safety-testing criteria for these vaccines includes pre-existing conditions and auto-immune disorders. These conditions include hypertension, diabetes, asthma, pulmonary, liver and kidney disease, as well as chronic infections that are stable and controlled.

Whether someone gets infected with COVID-19 right before or right after getting a booster shot, an infection may cause symptoms, but isn’t likely to interfere with the booster’s effects, said Amesh Adalja, MD, an infectious disease physician at Johns Hopkins School of Public Health in Baltimore.

Top Rumor Themes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rumor Theme</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Long Covid</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Treatment/cure</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Symptoms</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Testing</td>
<td>0</td>
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<tr>
<td>Variants</td>
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</tbody>
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Fact Checking

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Know your facts when it comes to vaccine side-effects: (16) some people get side effects that disrupt their day-to-day activities, they are not life-threatening and go away on their own after a few days. Others experience no side-effects at all. Common side-effects include pain, redness and swelling around the place where the vaccine was administered, as well as tiredness, headache, muscle pain, chills, fever, and nausea.

If you experience side-effects that you are concerned about, you can contact the MoPH vaccine hotline fee-of-charge on 1214 to report your symptoms, and you will be provided with further health assistance.

Practice preventative measures such as regular hand washing with soap and water for at least 20 seconds or sanitizing your hands if clean water is not available. This helps communities stay protected not just from COVID-19, but from multiple air-borne infectious diseases.

Get vaccinated if you are eligible. Starting March 2022, the Ministry of Public Health has started giving the Pfizer BioNTech vaccine to the age group 12-18 years, and the Moderna vaccine to the age group 19 and above. (17) Anyone -including Palestinian, Syrian, and Migrants of different nationalities even if their residency papers are not up-to-date- wishing to receive the Covid-19 vaccine can make a prior appointment through the COVAX platform: covax.moph.gov.lb or go to the nearest vaccination center without a prior appointment.

Seek medical help from a trusted professional healthcare provider if you feel unwell. If you are unsure of where to seek such services, visit the Ministry of Physical Health list of Primary Healthcare Centers in Lebanon: phcc.pdf (moph.gov.lb)
or the latest Primary Healthcare Centers list prepared by UNHCR here: Document - Lebanon:Inter-Agency - PHC Masterlist - 25 February 2022 (unhcr.org).

These centers provide subsidized or free-of-charge services for all nationalities living in Lebanon.
COVID-19 is an infectious disease caused by the SARS-CoV-2 virus. Most people infected with the virus will experience mild to moderate respiratory illness and recover without requiring special treatment. (18)

However, some will become seriously ill and require medical attention. Older people and those with underlying medical conditions like cardiovascular disease, diabetes, chronic respiratory disease, or cancer are more likely to develop serious illness. (19)

‘Long COVID’ is when people continue to experience symptoms for weeks or months after their diagnosis—even after they test negative. These symptoms can include: fatigue, shortness of breath, heart palpitations, chest pain or tightness, and brain fog, among others. (20) While data varies on the percentage of people who get ‘long COVID’, studies show that vaccinations can prevent ‘long COVID’ in up to 50% of people. (21)

Most Syrian refugees live in high-density camps with poor access to water, sanitation, and hygiene services, leaving them at high risk of contracting COVID-19. (22) Already, data provided by the United Nations shows that Syrian refugees have died from COVID-19 at a rate 3 to 4 times the national average. (23)

Recently, there has been a decreasing global trend in the number of new weekly infections and fatalities (24). To this, the WHO warns: "The trends should be interpreted with caution as several countries are progressively changing their COVID-19 testing strategies, resulting in lower overall numbers of tests performed and as a result lower numbers of cases detected" (25)

This means that there are cases in all areas of Lebanon, including camps, but they are under-reported.

Slowing of vaccination locally is due to many reasons: hesitancy, vaccination fatigue, people assuming that Omicron is mild and there is no need to get vaccine anymore, plus news from other European countries to lift preventive measures gave impression that covid is no more severe. It should be noted that in some (26) of these European countries reached more than 80% vaccination rates, (27) while in Lebanon vaccination coverage is estimated at around 40% only. (28)

The Health sector situation overview and updates on 25 February 2022 cites a decreased access to services, both related to vaccines as well as general health-care services, among vulnerable populations, (29) while vaccines remain available and centers remain open.

Many people take vitamin C, zinc, green tea or echinacea to boost their immune systems, but these supplements are unlikely to prevent you from getting sick with COVID-19. (30) Some supplements can be dangerous if you already suffer from any chronic conditions or allergies, or if you are pregnant or breastfeeding. According to health professionals, other substances that were falsely labelled as potential cures for COVID-19 -such as colloidal silver and Oleandrine- have negative effects and should be avoided altogether. (31)
Rumor #2

Hoax

“First of all, the disease [COVID-19] does not exist at the moment. Second, the infection rate is zero here [in our camp]. Thirdly, most of the COVID-19 vaccination centers have closed their doors and halted services. We took the first two vaccinations, and they told us they would call us for the booster shot but they shut down operations and no one contacted us. Finally, drinking hot drinks and taking vitamins are the basis of treatment.”

Recommendations

- If you identify any COVID-19 symptoms, you should talk to your doctor or nurse or to the community health workers in your area. You can also contact MoPH COVID-19 hotline on 1787. They will be able to inform you about the safest treatment that is adapted to your condition or symptoms.

- To find Primary Healthcare centers near you that offer subsidized or free-of-charge services available for all nationalities living in Lebanon, use the above mentioned mapping of lists:

  Ministry of Physical Health list of Primary Healthcare Centers in Lebanon: phcc.pdf (moph.gov.lb)

  or the latest Primary Healthcare Centers list prepared by UNHCR here: Document - Lebanon:Inter-Agency - PHC Masterlist - 25 February 2022 (unhcr.org)

- If any medication is found effective and safe to use, WHO and MoPH will recommend its usage through their platforms, and they will also inform your health care providers. If you want to know more about the available medicines safe to treat COVID-19 symptoms, please call the Preventive Medicine Center at 01-843769 | 01-830300.

  You can also follow MoPH relevant pages: Facebook – Twitter – COVID-19 Page – Vaccine Page to stay up-to-date.

- Do not try to self-medicate and do not buy any supplement from any pharmacy without asking a trusted professional about it first, ideally getting a prescription and an explanation of how this substance works in your body. It would be ideal to take multiple opinions, as some supplements are dangerous especially for people with chronic health conditions, or pregnant/breastfeeding women.

- The recommended and proven way to protect ourselves from severe disease if infected with COVID-19 is to get vaccinated. Vaccines have proven to provide long-term immunity against severe COVID-19 infection -and protect you from suffering through ‘long COVID’ symptoms- as opposed to short term symptom relief which certain drugs, supplements, vitamins or beverages may provide.
Sources

3. According to the World Health Organization – Lebanon’s daily brief April 29th, 2022, prepared by WHO & MoPH
4. Same source
5. Same source
6. “Sohatona” – the first vaccination mobile application to increase children’s routine vaccines uptake | UNICEF Lebanon
9. Same source
12. The MoPH Ensures That Safe And Effective Vaccines Are Strictly Used
14. Same source
22. Same source
23. Same source
24. Same source
25. Same source