CAMPAIGN:

INFÓRMATE, PROTÉGETE, VACÚNATE

BULLETIN #1
APRIL/MAY 2021

AIMED AT COMMUNITY LEADERS, HUMANITARIAN ACTORS AND ACTRESSES AND THE MEDIA

IN COLLABORATION WITH:
This bulletin analyzes COVID-19-related rumors circulating in Puerto Rico during April and May 2021 and provides recommendations on how to improve risk communication and respond to misinformation by offering locally relevant and reliable information that responds to community questions and concerns.

Mercy Corps Puerto Rico is partnering with Internews and other implementing partners (Puerto Rico Public Health Trust, Ciencia Puerto Rico and Ciencia en tus Manos) in the Infórmate, Protégete, Vacúnate Program to inform an evidence-based communication campaign to address the most common rumors and false narratives surrounding COVID-19 and vaccines.

Collaborative efforts have been combined to listen to people's concerns by implementing community and social media listening through short online surveys and the ongoing monitoring of various social media platforms, such as Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp, and YouTube.

It is normal for the rapidly changing evolution of information on vaccines to create confusion. In Puerto Rico, there are various barriers in the communication of such information, for example, language barriers and the use of technical language in communication. This hinders the accessibility of information in different populations. In addition, we have observed a trend of rumors emerging on traditional social media platforms. This could be due to misleading news titles and a lack of clarity in writing news related to COVID-19 and the vaccine.

Based on our learnings one of our key recommendations is to facilitate the connection between infodemic managers, public health communicators and media experts to orient on best practices on communicating public health information and managing misinformation and risk communication.

Disclaimer: Rumors registered as confidential in this program are the responsibility of their issuers and do not represent the opinion of Mercy Corps Puerto Rico or its collaborators.
While more and more people are getting vaccinated for COVID-19 in Puerto Rico constituting an advancement for distribution at the local level, community uncertainty and reluctance around getting vaccinated continue. Where there is uncertainty and where questions remain unanswered - rumors will arise.

Since March 2021, we have collected more than 1,000 pieces of information - in the forms of questions and concerns, misinformation/disinformation ('rumors') - from social media platforms and local communities and categorized these data by the topics they relate to and their level of risk. The community engagement and social media listening approach used to collect this data includes content from a wide range of social media channels and local demographics with significant community participation.

The rumor examples highlighted in this bulletin were chosen according to the risk they pose within local communities and how common they were.

Fourteen (14) community focal points representing several institutions, such as CBOs and schools across Puerto Rico contributed rumor content they encountered in their communities and on social media on a regular basis.

Four (4) social media platforms were monitored (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, WhatsApp) and COVID-19 related rumor content was logged and analyzed.
Risk is determined by assessing a range of factors including a) cultural relevance, b) timing, c) online engagement, d) the believability of a rumor, and most importantly, e) the potential negative impact a rumor may have on the health, well-being, and safety of local communities or service providers.

**HIGH RISK:** A rumor that is very likely be believed among the larger community with potentially severe negative impacts resulting in serious harm to an individual or group including inciting violence, or creating widespread fear/panic. High risk rumors may encourage widespread avoidance of testing/treatment or harm towards health workers and other service providers.

**MEDIUM RISK:** A rumor that has the potential to be believed among the larger community with potentially moderate negative impacts to a community or individual’s health, well-being, or safety. Medium risk rumors may have a moderate impact on health seeking behaviors.

**LOW RISK:** A rumor that is either unlikely to be believed among the community or with limited negative impacts to a community or individual’s health, well-being, or safety or to the pandemic response.

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**WHAT THEMES DO WE USE TO ANALYZE VACCINE RUMORS?**

- **TARGET POPULATION:** Rumor content focusing on specific group
- **DISTRIBUTION:** Rumor content related to vaccine distribution
- **PRODUCT DEVELOPMENT:** Rumor content about COVID-19 vaccines and treatments development
- **DEATH:** Rumor content that mentions death, if you get the vaccinated you will die
- **EXPERIMENTATION:** Rumor content alluding to experimentation
- **EFFICACY:** Rumor content stating that vaccines are not efficient
- **SAFETY:** Rumor content that claims potential harm from vaccines
- **RELIGION:** Rumor content that relates to religion
- **POLITICAL AGENDA:** Rumor content including disinformation and political conspiracy theories
- **ACCESS & AFFORDABILITY:** Rumor content about access to the vaccines
In April 2021, the CDC and the FDA reviewed data about 6 reported cases of rare and severe blood clots in people who received the J&J Janssen vaccine and recommended pausing the use of the vaccine while they investigated further. At that time, nearly 7 million doses had been administered in the United States and its territories. After closely examining the data to assess the side effects related to the J&J vaccine, they concluded that the vaccine was safe and effective and that its benefits of preventing COVID-19 outweighed any potential risks. Moreover, the FDA and the CDC are remaining vigilant in continuing to investigate the outcomes of those who receive the Janssen vaccine and continue to monitor risks.

The widely circulated information about clotting issues caused safety concerns among the population in Puerto Rico even though these are extremely rare. We collected rumors in which people expressed their doubts and fears about the safety of the J&J vaccine. Rumor examples on this topic included in this bulletin were coded as High Risk, they could increase COVID-19 vaccine hesitancy in the territory despite how rare cases of these potential side effects were.

**WHY CONTEXT IS IMPORTANT?**

The J&J vaccine had been distributed in Puerto Rico since March 2021. When the J&J warning was announced and Janssen vaccination paused, COVID-19 cases and hospitalization were rising in the island along with vaccine safety concerns in the population. This situation with increased cases and uncertainty amplified the circulation of misinformation and vaccine-related rumors.

**For more information visit:** [https://www.cdc.gov/vaccines/covid-19/info-by-product/janssen/index.html](https://www.cdc.gov/vaccines/covid-19/info-by-product/janssen/index.html)

**RECOMMENDATIONS**

- **Listen carefully** to the concerns of the communities and respond to concerns expediently.
- **Work with local community leaders and medical experts** to inform people about the safety and efficacy of J&J and other vaccines, and that studies show that the Janssen vaccine is safe for most people and will not cause any serious side effects.
- **Provide clear information** explaining the reasons behind the CDC and the FDA pause and the review of the vaccine data and how this shows that the system for vetting vaccines and monitoring outcomes is actively working to keep people safe.
- **Share public health information and recommendations** related to common and severe vaccine side effects and what people should do in case they experience issues after being vaccinated.
On April 2021, CDC and FDA recommended pausing distribution of the Johnson & Johnson vaccine in the United States and Puerto Rico. Here’s what you need to know about what this means for now. Note that the pause is not permanent. Taking the time to investigate any possible adverse reactions is a sign that the systems are working.
In April and May 2021, rumors about COVID-19 vaccines being unsafe experimental treatments that alleged people died because of getting vaccinated surged on social media. Facebook users in Puerto Rico regularly post that the vaccines are unsafe and reference the speed of vaccine development and approval as happening too fast to allow for proper testing and vetting.

Other social media users even insinuate that citizens are being used by scientists and the government as experimental "guinea pigs". Numerous conspiracy theories have emerged and circulated on social media with some claiming that the vaccines are a bioweapon for population control, undermining citizens' trust in COVID-19 vaccines and the rollout. These rumors were coded as Medium High Risk because of the existing history of eugenics and unethical clinical trials in Puerto Rico and the impact of these rumors on shifting people’s opinion about getting vaccinated.

**EXPERIMENTATION**

The history of Puerto Rico has fueled skepticism towards government-run health campaigns which provides fertile ground for rumors to circulate. Some apprehension to the COVID-19 vaccine and information shared by local authorities among Puerto Rican people may emerge from previous negative experiences of medical experimentation without informed consent that deepened mistrust. One of these instances occurred in the 1950s, when clinical trials were carried out on Puerto Rican women. These trials were followed by a massive sterilization campaign based on discriminatory policies, propaganda, and disinformation.***

Thus, skepticism of medical interventions is fertile ground for the spread of misinformation and conspiracy theories.

**WHY CONTEXT IS IMPORTANT?**

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**YOU CAN FIND MORE INFORMATION AT:** Klein, Naomi, The Battle for Paradise: Puerto Rico Takes on the Disaster Capitalists (2018)

**RECOMMENDATIONS**

- **Understand and address the fear** behind the rumor. Ask why citizens of Puerto Rico are worried about experiments with people and work to reassure communities with sustainable, two-way communication for sharing concerns.

- **Respond to people’s concerns** with vetted and verified non-government affiliated information sources that address COVID-19 vaccine safety and efficacy issues in language that is easy to understand.

- **Share contextualize information and testimonials** of people who have been vaccinated and their experiences.
How a new vaccine is developed, approved and monitored.

Vaccines are developed and approved in phases. After laboratory research, a vaccine goes through four phases of clinical research, in which safety, dosage, immunological response to the vaccine and efficacy are determined.

We began hearing concerns about clinical trials in December 2020 and have been addressing this concern in a variety of ways including:

- **Collaborative Facebook Live sessions featuring medical doctors who validate the process of the COVID-19 clinical and explain the exact countries in which the vaccine clinical trials were conducted - thus sharing with community members that the clinical trials were not being conducted in Puerto Rico.**
- **Developed an FAQ that included clinical trial locations and circulated via social media outlets and shared with community leaders.**
SAFETY-VACCINE SIDE EFFECT CONCERNS

Many people are talking about the short- and long-term side effects of the three COVID-19 vaccines available in Puerto Rico which circulated on local communities and social media during April and May 2021.

These rumors reflect people’s fears and questions about what to expect after receiving the vaccine. Some rumors focus on side effects that could happen immediately after getting vaccinated, such as fever, muscle pain, tiredness, headache, etc. In other rumors, people wonder about vaccine side effects that could appear after longer periods, even years. The rumors categorized under Safety were coded as medium or high risk, depending on the specific content and their potential impact on shifting people’s opinion about getting vaccinated.

“A woman told me that she will not get vaccinated because of the side effects that it can bring, such as muscle aches etc.”
Community Member
April 8, 2021

“Because it is poison! Contaminating the body of human beings.”
Facebook
May 4, 2021

“This vaccine will be affecting many more areas of YOUR life than you can even imagine.”
Facebook
May 6, 2021

WHY CONTEXT IS IMPORTANT?

Puerto Rico is characterized by having a strong community-based word-of-mouth history and collective culture. In a focus group discussion we conducted to understand the tendency in Puerto Rico to prefer certain vaccines, the participants mentioned that many people refuse to receive a vaccine after having heard from other friends, family, and community members about their post-vaccination experiences and side effects.

It is normal for vaccines to have mild side effects. Common side effects can be low-grade fever, or muscle aches and these are signs that your body’s immune system is working hard to prepare your body to fight the virus. Such side effects usually go away on their own after a few days. It does not mean something is wrong with the vaccine or with your body, rather the opposite.

It is also normal to be concerned when it’s about your own body and health. People are more worried now, because the COVID-19 vaccines were produced faster than other vaccines to respond to the Public Health Emergency worldwide. However, all vaccines have gone through rigorous testing and were found to be safe and effective by the Food and Drug Administration (FDA). The vaccines continue to be monitored closely for possible new side effects or issues. The fact that side effects are widely covered in the media, is because the process is transparent and a lot of precautions are in place to minimize any risks and harm.

However, the fast turnaround of the vaccines continues to be a fertile ground for the spread of misinformation and the circulation of content coming from untrusted sources.

For more information on COVID-19 side effects visit: https://www.who.int/news-room/feature-stories/detail/side-effects-of-covid-19-vaccines
RECOMMENDATIONS

- **Listen to people's safety** concerns about the COVID-19 vaccines and provide accurate and reliable information on the most common side effects after vaccination to increase people's awareness of what to expect after receiving the vaccine.
- **Share information on** how to address COVID-19 vaccine common short-term side effects.
- **Advise people to seek** immediate medical assistance if they have a severe reaction to the COVID-19 vaccine.

**MERCY CORPS PUERTO RICO RESPONSE**

You are already vaccinated! It is normal to experience side effects after getting vaccinated.

Here we share more information:

**EFECTOS SECUNDARIOS DE LA VACUNA CONTRA EL Covid-19**

El efecto secundario más común es el dolor en lugar de la inyección en la parte superior del brazo; también puede haber enrojecimiento o hinchazón.

También podrías experimentar fiebre, dolor de cabeza y fatiga. Estos efectos secundarios suelen durar entre 24 y 48 horas y no más de unos días.

*Fuente: Escuela de Salud Pública Johns Hopkins*
During the month of April and May we identified a number of COVID-19 vaccine efficacy concern rumours. These rumors tend to underline vaccines inability to build full immunity against the virus to justify people's decision of not getting vaccinated. Several rumours included the risk of getting infected with COVID-19 after being fully vaccinated.

Rumors under the Efficacy category that were ranked as low or medium risk.

### Efficacy

- **How well the vaccines help to prevent you from spreading the virus, even after you have been vaccinated.**
- **How long the vaccine will protect people from getting the virus.**
- **How well the current vaccines help against the new variants of the virus that cause COVID-19.**

COVID-19 vaccines are effective at preventing getting the COVID-19 disease, especially the more severe forms of the illness and death. The vaccines also reduce the risk of people spreading the virus. As such, vaccines represent an important intervention that will help reduce severe cases and death in the current pandemic.

While the vaccine helps, especially to keep yourself healthy, there are still good reasons to be cautious and continue to adopt prevention strategies even after being vaccinated. Scientists are still doing research on the following topics:

- How well the vaccines help to prevent you from spreading the virus, even after you have been vaccinated.
- How long the vaccine will protect people from getting the virus.
- How well the current vaccines help against the new variants of the virus that cause COVID-19.

### Why Context is Important?

### Recommendations

- **Work with local experts and health providers** to orient people about the efficacy of COVID-19 vaccines and the individual and collective benefits of getting vaccinated.
- **Underscore the efficacy of the COVID-19 vaccines** to reduce severity of disease for those infected
- **Share clear information** on herd immunity and how mass vaccination can help to stop spreading and the virus from mutating.
You’ve probably heard or read about someone getting sick with Covid-19 even after receiving the vaccine, but ... why does this happen?

PROBABLEMMENTE HAS ESCUCHADO O LEÍDO SOBRE ALGUIEN QUE SE HA ENFERMADO CON COVID-19 AUN LUEGO DE RECIBIR LA VACUNA, PERO ...

¿POR QUÉ SUCede ESTO?

EXISTEN VARIAS RAZONES, ENTRE ELAS:

1. Las vacunas son excelentes, pero no perfectas, y ... ¿POR QUÉ SUCede ESTO?

1. LAS VACUNAS NO SON PERFECTAS

Las vacunas contra el COVID-19 son efectivas. Sin embargo, un porcentaje bajo de personas aún puede contraer el COVID-19 si están expuestas al virus que lo causa. Aunque es mucho menos probable que las personas vacunadas se enfermen, sigue existiendo una pequeña posibilidad de contagio.

2. PUEDES CONTRAER COVID-19 ANTES DE ESTAR COMPLETAMENTE VACUNADO(A)

Recuerda que la inmunidad se alcanza dos semanas después de recibir la dosis final de la vacuna, esto se conoce como “estar completamente vacunado(a)”. Las personas pueden contraer el Covid-19 y mostrar síntomas severos si aún no están completamente vacunadas.

Por otra parte, un estudio del CDC (porque son Centros para el Control y la Prevención de Enfermedades) demostró que el riesgo de infección por Covid-19 se redujo en un 90% en las personas que sí están completamente vacunadas.

POR ESO, ¡VACÚNATE Y RECIBE TODAS LAS DOSIS NECESARIAS PARA LA VACUNA QUE TE TOQUE!

Además, practica las medidas de prevención: usa la mascarilla, mantén distanciamiento físico e higiene de manos y evita aglomeraciones y espacios cerrados.

INFORMATE

PROTEGE

VACUNATE
BEHAVIOR AFTER VACCINATION

Should vaccinated people have to observe COVID-19 prevention measures? How will the daily life of people change after getting the COVID-19 vaccine? These questions and others on what life will look like after vaccination have sparked many discussions and rumors. On social media platforms in Puerto Rico, there are many rumors in which people complain about the vaccinated people selfishly spreading the virus without thinking about the well-being of the unvaccinated people around them. This must be addressed directly through clear guidance on what is permitted after vaccination reflecting the guidance of trusted health experts and the latest science. The rumors chosen for this bulletin were coded as Medium Risk because people’ behavior after vaccination could impact COVID-19 transmission and affect the health of unvaccinated individuals and people with weakened immune systems.

WHY CONTEXT IS IMPORTANT?

As the vaccination distribution continues, there is a lack of information and consequently a lot of uncertainty about how the vaccine could change COVID-19 restriction measures and possibility for social interaction.

CDC officials continue to revise guidance as more data is collected to inform protocols after getting vaccinated.

Find more information at: https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/vaccines/fully-vaccinated.html

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Disseminate updated guidelines and public health recommendations for partially and fully vaccinated individuals and what they should do to avoid serious effects on other people’s health and well-being.

- Address the most common questions regarding what activities and social interaction are permitted for vaccinated people and their socialization with other vaccinated or unvaccinated people to counter the risk of spreading COVID-19 on unvaccinated people.

- Clearly define when people are considered fully vaccinated: The vaccine takes some time to exert its protective effects. 2 weeks after their second dose in a 2-dose series, such as the Pfizer or Moderna vaccines, or 2 weeks after a single-dose vaccine, such as Johnson & Johnson’s Janssen vaccine. (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC], 2021).
Recently, the CDCs updated their guidelines and recommendations regarding prevention measures. However, CDCs encourage local authorities to implement these measures according to their local context. In Puerto Rico, it is still important to continue practicing prevention measures, particularly in closed spaces and around unvaccinated people.
LOCAL RESOURCES TO ADDRESS VACCINE RUMORS

These are non-governmental trusted sources that could be shared in your local communities and networks to inform about COVID-19 and vaccines.

"Infórmate, Protégete, Vacúnate"

is an information campaign that arises directly from this program to meet the information needs identified through community and social media monitoring. The informational pieces are strategically designed to provide reliable, science-based information in an attractive format and an easy-to-understand language. Mercy Corps, together with its collaborators Puerto Rico Public Health Trust, Ciencia Puerto Rico and Ciencia en tus Manos, distributes the content through their respective social networks. All content is also shared with the community focal points that belong to this initiative, who also disseminate the information through their own networks, ensuring that it reaches even the people who are least likely to be exposed to it.

https://www.facebook.com/mercycorpspr

"Aquí nos cuidamos"

is a freely accessible collection of educational information and community content on science and public health created by the non-profit organization Ciencia Puerto Rico (CienciaPR). Their website and social media platforms offer information about vaccines, COVID-19 in general, and the importance of vaccination as an act of community solidarity. Also provides educational material and public health recommendations for vaccinated individuals.

https://www.aquinoscuidamos.org/

Ciencia en tus Manos

is a non-profit organization whose main objective is to provide scientific information about COVID-19 in an easy and accessible way for everyone.

https://www.cienciaentusmanos.com/covid19

cetm@cienciaentusmanos.com

Voces Puerto Rico

is a non-profit organization that brings together individuals and organizations that share a common mission of increasing vaccination rates in a timely and effective manner for people of all ages in Puerto Rico. Their website offers vaccination information, advocacy work, and other resources.

https://www.vocespr.org/

Asociación de Salud Primaria de PR, Inc

is a non-profit organization that supports primary health centers in Puerto Rico, provides basic information about COVID-19 and vaccination, including a catalog of vaccine providers.

https://saludprimariapr.org/web/covid-19/

The Puerto Rico Public Health Trust

is a program that works with private and public partners to identify and execute community-led, evidence-based solutions. Their website provides updated information, statistics, webinars, advice from experts, answers to frequently asked questions, and recommendations on COVID-19.

https://prsciencetrust.org/prpht/

YOU CAN REPORT HERE!

FORMULARIO DE SOSPECHA

There is a complaint mechanism available from the Department of Health of Puerto Rico to report misconduct and irregularities during the COVID-19 vaccine distribution.

Departamento de Salud, División de Vacunación, PO Box 70184, Centro Médico, Río Piedras, PR 00936-8184, por email a abusoyfraudeVFC@salud.pr.gov , o llamando al Tel. 765-2929 ext. 3327

These are governmental sources for relevant information related to COVID-19 and vaccines:

- COVID-19 call center (operating 24/7, in Spanish) Call 1-787-999-6202.
- You can find a list of vaccines providers in the official website of the PR State Health Department-
  http://www.salud.gov.pr/
- You can make an appointment for COVID-19 vaccine at-
  www.protegetevacunate.com
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