

'Govt must convince the public'

Experts: Majority ready to accept Covid-19 vaccine but more awareness needed

By CLARISSA CHUNG
clarissachung@thestar.com.my

PETALING JAYA: A recent Health Ministry survey that found 67% of respondents accepting of the Covid-19 vaccine is a good indicator, though more needs to be done to educate the public, say health experts.

Epidemiologist Datuk Prof Dr Awang Bulgiba Awang Mahmud of Universiti Malaysia said the 67% acceptance rate among Malaysians was a good start.

"That would mean the majority are ready to accept a vaccine, despite some negative publicity surrounding Covid-19 vaccines.

"For Malaysians who are unsure about the vaccines or who do not want to take it, the government must convince them through clear and objective explanations by credible experts.

"It needs to be a continuous effort as it's not an easy job. But it can and needs to be done. We don't have many options if we want to exit this pandemic and see a return to normalcy," he said.

Although the 67% acceptance rate was encouraging, he said the vaccination coverage might not be sufficient to achieve herd immunity.

Also known as herd protection, herd immunity is when most of a population is immune to an infectious disease, thus conferring a certain level of indirect protection for those who are not immune to the disease.

For example, if 80% of a population is immune to a virus, four out of every five people who encounter someone with the virus will not get infected (and thus, won't spread the disease).

Dr Awang said the matter is an urgent one, with the discovery of newer variants of the SARS-CoV-2, like the B.1.1.7 variant reported to originate from the United Kingdom or the B.1.351 variant from South Africa.

"These variants have been reported to be spreading to other countries now," he said, adding that the new variant from the UK causes a higher infectivity rate, which is known as its R value (reproduction number).

"The higher the R value, the higher the vaccination coverage that will be required in order to achieve herd immunity.

"I would estimate that for herd immunity to happen in Malaysia, the proportion of the population which would need to be vaccinated may need to be as high as 80% to 90%, as the R number for some of the clusters in the third wave in Malaysia looks to be relatively high," he said.

The survey, conducted last December, also indicate that out of those who are open to taking the vaccine, 95.7% feel that the vaccine is safe but only 67.4% have no doubts about the vaccine ingredients.


About 17% of the 212,006 respondents are unsure about undergoing Covid-19 vaccination due to concerns over side effects and its efficacy.

Another 16% rejected outright the idea of taking the Covid-19 vaccines.

Universiti Malaya Department of Social and Preventive Medicine public health medicine specialist Assoc Prof Dr Rafdzah Ahmad Zaki said the acceptance rate here is comparable to most other countries.

"A study in the United States published by

Malaysia's Covid-19 vaccine portfolio (as of Jan 7, 2021)



Researchers	% of population	Efficacy rate	Storage temperature	Type of vaccine	
Pfizer-BioNTech	United States (Pfizer) Germany (BioNTech)	20%	95%	-70°C	Messenger RNA (ribonucleic acid)
AstraZeneca-Oxford	United Kingdom (in partnership with Oxford University)	10%	62-90%	4°C	Viral vector (adenovirus)
CoronaVac	China (Sinovac)	22%	>50%	4°C	Inactivated virus
CanSino	China	10.80%	-	4°C	Viral vector (adenovirus)
Sputnik V	Russia (Gamaleya Institute)	10%	92%	4°C	Viral vector (adenovirus)
Covax agreement	Global facility to promote equitable access to Covid-19 vaccines	10%	-	-	-

Source: Health Ministry

TheStargraphics

“For Malaysians who are unsure about the vaccines or who do not want to take it, the government must convince them through clear and objective explanations by credible experts.”

Dr Awang Bulgiba Awang Mahmud

The Lancet in last September found that about 67% of the respondents would accept a Covid-19 vaccine.

"A global survey published in October 2020 found that the overall acceptance rate was about 71.5%," she said, adding that the lack of overwhelming acceptance of Covid-19 vaccines is likely due to limited information.

"Some people are hesitant as they believe they have low infection risk, others have concerns about the vaccines' safety, while some are hesitant because of a lack of trust in the health system to distribute and deliver the vaccine according to its specification, such as storage temperature," she said.

Open and transparent dialogue, she added, needs to be facilitated to discuss the risks and benefits of vaccination.

"The public also needs to be convinced about the capability of our health system," she said, adding that vaccinating frontliners first can also lead to greater uptake by the general population later.

Universiti Putra Malaysia epidemiologist Assoc Prof Dr Malina Osman said the survey provides "baseline information" on the expected vaccine coverage among the

Malaysians' acceptance of Covid-19 vaccination (Number of respondents: 212,006)



Source: Health Ministry's survey (Dec 21-28)

TheStargraphics

Malaysian population.

But she noted that this particular MOH survey findings may not represent the whole of Malaysia due to its sampling method.

"The findings are true for the selected Malaysian respondents who are willing to participate in the survey.

"Also, as the instrument of the study is through online questionnaires, there would also be a possibility one respondent submitted more than one response using different emails or different mobile gadgets.

"In my opinion, there is a (silent) majority who are willing to accept vaccines but did not or declined to participate (in the survey)," said Dr Malina, who also suggested

that certain legal provisions be introduced to counter anti-vaccination narratives that go against scientific knowledge.

"As these would confuse the public, we have to come up with strict recommendations.

"In my view, health education and counselling may not be adequate to persuade this specific group (anti-vaxxers)," she said, adding that in some European countries, there were proposals that those who declined the Covid-19 vaccine should declare that they have done so.

"However, this needs to be carefully decided to avoid violation of human rights," she said.