

## A look back at the health crisis and vaccination against Covid-19

This note, written by Patrick Peretti-Watel, Pierre Verger and Jeremy Ward, presents the preliminary results of the first survey from the ICOVAC project (funded by : ANRS- Emerging Infectious Diseases, dir. P. Peretti-Watel and Jeremy Ward). The survey was conducted by the Provence-Alpes-Cote d'Azur Regional Health Observatory. The questionnaire was designed by the authors. Data collection, analysis and the production of this report benefited from the support of Cyril Bérenger (Database Manager, ORS PACA), Sébastien Cortaredona (Statistician, AMU, IRD), Gwenaëlle Maradan (Survey platform manager, ORS PACA) and Bilel Mebarki (Graphic designer, ORS PACA).

The ICOVAC Wave 1 survey was conducted between 19 July and 14 August 2023, among a sample of 4303 people, representative of the adult population living in mainland France by age, gender, socio-professional category and region of residence (quota method).

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### Main results

- The French remain very divided on the management health crisis and, in 2023, as time goes by, they seem to be minimising the seriousness of the crisis. For 40%, the initial confinement was excessive (36% in 2022) and, for 39%, it was unnecessary to vaccinate healthy adults (33% in 2022). On the other hand fewer people this year believe that the health pass was necessary (54%, compared with 59% in 2022) and that we removed the masks too early in the spring of 2022 (39%, compared with 52%).
- In the case of healthcare workers who refused Covid-19 vaccination, here again opinions are divided, but on the whole the French support them recalcitrant more often than they condemn them. In particular, 69% felt that they had simply exercised their free will, like any other citizen.
- Among adults who have been vaccinated against Covid-19, almost half (46%) still have doubts about the vaccine they received. This is more often the case among women and the under-50s.
- Covid-19 is becoming increasingly commonplace. In the summer of 2022, 54% of French people believed that Covid-19 was no more serious than influenza. One year later 68% share this opinion.
- Only half of French people say they are in favour of a bivalent influenza-Covid-19 vaccine offered every winter: 48% in favour, 37% against, 15% had no opinion.
- The French are very uncertain about mRNA vaccines. Many respondents answered "I don't know" to questions about them. They also elicit ambivalent reactions: 62% of those surveyed stressed that there is still a lot we don't know about the long-term adverse effects of these vaccines, but 51% saw mRNA as a promising technology for the medicine of the future. A relative majority also believe that in the event of a new epidemic, mRNA vaccines will be very useful. Finally, one French person in five believes that these vaccines modify our DNA.

## Summary

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## A look back at the health crisis and its management

In this survey, a first series of retrospective questions looked back at the health crisis and some of the key measures taken to manage it, in chronological order (cf. Figure 1): the first confinement in spring 2020, the policy of mass testing (with a peak in the number of tests per day of over 700,000 for the first time on Christmas Eve 2020 and twice as many the following Christmas), the vaccination campaign in the general adult population from spring 2021, the vaccination mandate decreed for healthcare workers and the introduction of the health pass in summer 2021, the extension of the campaign to children at the end of the same year and, finally, the lifting of mask mandates in most enclosed public places in spring 2022.

The responses show that the French are still very divided on these measures, as there is no consensus on any of the assertions put forward. First of all, three years on, 40% of respondents agreed with the statement that “the first confinement was an excessive measure”, while 56% disagreed (4% did not say). Similarly, 46% thought that people had been tested too much against Covid-19, while 48% disagreed; 39% thought that it was unnecessary to vaccinate healthy adults, while 54% disagreed; 47% thought that healthcare workers should not have been obliged to be vaccinated, while 47% also disagreed; 54% thought that the health pass was necessary, while 40% disagreed; finally, 39% thought that “we took off our masks too early in spring 2022”, compared with 55% who disagreed. Vaccinating children stands out in two ways, as the responses are both more unbalanced and more often undecided: 58% of respondents reject the assertion that they should have been vaccinated more, compared with only 27% who agree, a difference of more than thirty percentage points, while 15% have no opinion on this question (compared with 4% to 7% for the other items).

**Figure 1. Opinions on the management of the health crisis, July-August 2023 (ICOVAC, wave 1, N=4303)**

The first confinement was an excessive measure



Too many people have been tested against COVID-19



There was no need to vaccinate healthy adults



Healthcare workers should not have been required to be vaccinated



The health pass was a necessary measure



More children should have been vaccinated



In the spring of 2022, we took off our masks too soon



■ Totally agree   
 ■ Somewhat agree   
 ■ Somewhat disagree  
■ Totally disagree   
 ■ Don't know

Most of these questions have been asked in previous surveys, particularly in the fifth wave of the SLAVACO<sup>1</sup> project, which was completed a year earlier. The changes observed are generally modest, but almost always in the same direction. The proportion of people who were critical of the first confinement rose from 36% in the summer of 2022 to 40% in the summer of 2023, while the proportion of people who felt that “too much testing had been done” fell only slightly (49% in the summer of 2022, 46% in 2023). The proportion of respondents who believe that it was pointless to vaccinate healthy adults rises from 33% to 39%, and support for the health pass declines (59% of respondents consider it necessary in 2022, compared with 54% this year). The clearest change concerns masks: in 2022, 52% thought we had taken them off too early, compared with 39% in 2023. These changes suggest that, one year on, the French have become a little more critical of the way the crisis is being managed, perhaps because the perceived seriousness of the pandemic is fading, since they are now much less inclined to think that the requirement to wear masks ended too soon in spring 2022.

These opinions vary little according to gender, except that women are more often hostile to the assertion that more children should have been vaccinated (64% disagree, compared with 52% of men). In terms of age, the over-65s are more likely to be in favour of the measures taken: they were less likely to say that people had been tested too much (42%, compared with 52% of 35-50 year olds), that it was unnecessary to vaccinate healthy adults (29%, compared with 47% of 35-50 year olds) and that healthcare workers should not have been forced to be vaccinated (35%, compared with 54% of 18-34 year olds), while they were more likely to think that the health pass was necessary (66%, compared with 45% of 18-34 year olds).

Moreover, these opinions are still socially differentiated. For example, the self-employed were more critical of the initial confinement (56% thought it was excessive, compared with 45% of workers and 36% of executives) and mass testing (61% thought people had been tested too much, compared with 52% of blue-collar workers and 47% of managers). Similarly, respondents with a household income of 1,500 euros or less per month were more likely to think that it was unnecessary to vaccinate healthy adults (51% of them, compared with 28% of those with a monthly income of at least 4,000 euros) and that vaccination should not have been made mandatory for healthcare workers (56% compared with 37%); conversely, they were less likely to defend the health pass (45% thought it was necessary, compared with 60% of the more affluent).

Finally, to the question “Do you think the COVID-19 epidemic was managed in a sufficiently democratic manner?” 32% answered “somewhat agree”, 26% “somewhat disagree” and 25% “strongly disagree” (9% did not say). On this subject too, opinions are very divided, with a majority of negative responses (51%, compared with 40%) and results very similar to those collected in the summer of 2022 (in SLAVACO: 49% of respondents disagreed, compared with 41% who agreed). It should also be noted that there were three times as many clear-cut negative responses (“strongly disagree”) as clear-cut positive responses (“strongly agree”). Men are more likely to agree (43%, compared with 37% of women), as are the over-65s (51%, compared with a third of the under-50s), executives (44%, compared with only 27% of workers) and the most affluent (48% of those whose household income is at least 4,000 euros a month, compared with 33% of those whose household income is no more than 1,500 euros).

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.orspaca.org/sites/default/files/note-slavaco-n5.pdf>

## The case of healthcare workers who refused vaccination

The principle of mandatory vaccination for healthcare workers was voted through Parliament in August 2021, and introduced in September of the same year. This law provided for the suspension, without pay, of non-vaccinated staff. This decision met with strong opposition, particularly from the nursing unions, and a few thousand healthcare workers (fewer than 4,000 according to some estimates) were actually suspended. This mandate ended in May 2023.

A number of questions focused on the case of healthcare workers who refused to be vaccinated against Covid-19 (see Figure 2). Here again, the opinions of the French are divided, but on the whole they support these healthcare workers more often than they criticise them. In fact, the two statements critical of these healthcare workers were in the minority in our sample: 37% of respondents felt that they had professional misconduct, compared with 54% who disagreed and 43% who thought that they did not care enough about their patients' health, while 50% disagreed. Conversely, more than half felt that healthcare workers were in a good position to know whether or not they needed to be vaccinated (55% agreed, 36% disagreed) and more than two-thirds felt that they had simply exercised their free will, like any other citizen (69% agreed, 25% disagreed).

Overall, men are more critical than women of healthcare workers who refused to vaccinate, as are the oldest respondents, executives and people from the most affluent households. For example, 44% of men felt that these healthcare workers were at fault (compared to 32% of women), as did 56% of respondents aged over 65 (compared to 36% of those aged 18-34). Similarly, 45% of executives felt that they did not care enough about their patients' health (compared with 31% of workers). Conversely, 62% of respondents whose household income was €1,500 a month or less felt that their healthcare workers were in a good position to know whether or not they needed to be vaccinated, compared with 45% of respondents whose household income was at least €4,000 a month.

**Figure 2. Opinions on healthcare workers who refused to be vaccinated against covid-19, July-August 2023 (ICOVAC, wave 1, N=4303)**

### Healthcare workers who refused to be vaccinated against covid-19...

... were simply exercising their free will, like all citizens.



... were well placed to know whether they needed to be vaccinated or not.



... didn't care enough about their patients' health.



... were guilty of professional misconduct.



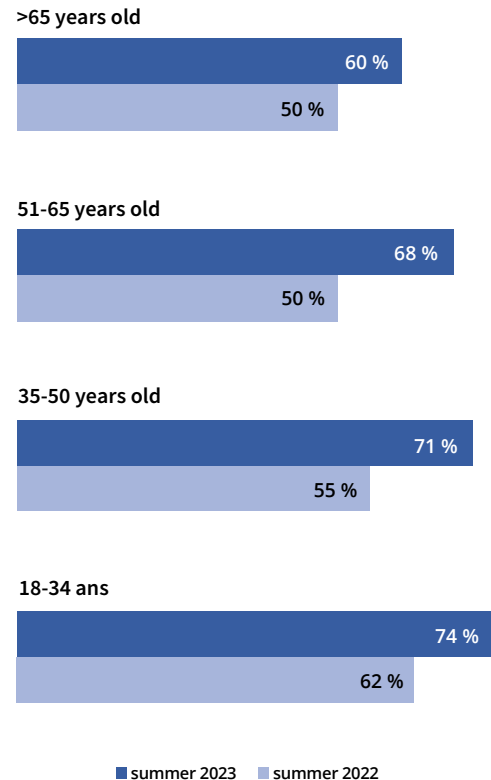
■ Totally agree ■ Somewhat agree ■ Somewhat disagree  
 ■ Totally disagree ■ Don't know

## Vaccination against Covid-19 today

The questionnaire also addressed vaccination against Covid-19, from three complementary angles: whether doubts persist among those vaccinated, the perceived seriousness of the disease today, and finally opinions on a bivalent seasonal vaccine against influenza and Covid-19. In the summer of 2022, 47% of respondents vaccinated against Covid-19 said they still had doubts or reservations about the vaccine they had received, and this proportion remained unchanged one year later (46% in the summer of 2023). These doubts are more common among women (52% of vaccinated women still have doubts, compared with 40% of men), the under-50s (51% of 18-34 year-olds, 57% of 35-50 year-olds, but 'only' 34% of the over-65s), workers (59%), employees (58%) and the self-employed (57%, compared with 47% of managers), or among the less well-off (51% of respondents with a monthly household income of less than €1,500, 37% of those with an income of €4,000 or more).

At the same time, Covid-19 appears more and more trivialized: in the summer of 2022, 54% of French people agreed with the statement that Covid-19 was now no more serious than the flu. and, in the summer of 2023, 68% share this opinion. The responses vary little according to socio-demographic profile, except according to age (see Figure 3): support for this opinion decreases with age, and progresses less rapidly among the oldest. Finally, the respondents had to decide on the proposal each winter of a bivalent vaccine against seasonal flu and Covid-19. A small half (48%) of French people say they are in favor of such a bivalent flu-Covid-19 vaccine, 37% are against it, 15% have no opinion. The socio-demographic profile associated with this opinion is the same as previously: men declare themselves more often in favor (53%, compared to 43% of women), as do those over 65 (58%, compared to 40% of those aged 18-34). years), executives (54%, compared to 38% of workers) and the wealthiest respondents (62% among those whose household has at least 4,000 euros per month, 39% when this monthly income does not exceed 1,500 euros).

**Figure 3. Proportion of respondents agreeing with the statement “from now on Covid-19 is no more serious than the flu” by age groups, July-August 2022 (SLAVACO wave 5, N=4004) July-August 2023 (ICOVAC wave 1, N=4303).**





## MRNA vaccines

The questionnaire also included a section dedicated to MRNA vaccines. Effective to prevent serious forms of the disease and safe, these vaccines played an essential role in the control of the pandemic, particularly in France and their rapid adaptability suggests that they will have still a big role to play in the future, against new variants as against other diseases. However, these vaccines also very quickly gave rise to specific fears, to the extent that they are based on a little-known technology and perceived as very recent, therefore without hindsight and above all relevant genetic engineering. Let us therefore recall that these vaccines do not modify the genome of cells and do not do not produce genetically modified cells and that they therefore do not constitute therapies genes.

It must first be emphasized that MRNA vaccines raises strong uncertainties among respondents. Indeed, for the six assertions proposed, from 23% to 46% of them prefer not to take a position (see Figure 4). Furthermore, two assertions attract the support of more than 50% of surveyed: “we still don’t know a lot about long-term adverse effects of MRNA vaccines” (62% agree, 15% disagree); “MRNA is a promising technology for the medicine of the future” (51% agree, 14% disagree). A relative majority believes also that, “in the case of a new epidemic, MRNA vaccines will be very useful” (46% agree, 19% disagree) and that “it’s thanks to MRNA vaccines than the Covid-19 epidemic could be controlled” (43% agree, 27% not All right). The last two assertions are the most controversial: 31% of respondents assimilate these vaccines to gene therapies, 23% refuse and 46% do not comment, while 20% think that these vaccines modify our DNA, 38% reject this assertion and 42% did not have an opinion.

These vaccines also elicit ambivalent reactions, which cannot be reduced to an accumulation of “for” or “against” responses: thus, the people who point out the ignorance of their long-term adverse effects, which equate them to gene therapies or think they modify MRNA, are however no less inclined than others to judge that these vaccines have made it possible to control the Covid-19 epidemic and that they will be without doubt very useful in the case of a new epidemic. Overall, women abstain more often, while men adhere more frequently to assertions favorable to MRNA vaccines. For example, 54% of men agree to say that in the case of a new epidemic these

**Figure 4. Opinions on MRNA vaccines, July-August 2023 (ICOVAC wave 1, N=4303).**

**Much is still unknown about the effects long-term adverse effects of MRNA vaccines.**



**MRNA is a promising technology for the medicine of the future.**



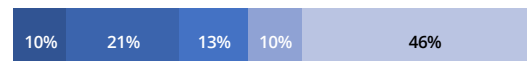
**In the case of a new epidemic, MRNA vaccines will be very useful.**



**It is thanks to MRNA vaccines that the epidemic of Covid 19 could be controlled.**



**MRNA vaccines are not real vaccines, they are gene therapies.**



**MRNA vaccines modify the DNA of the vaccinated.**



■ Totally agree   
 ■ Somewhat agree   
 ■ Somewhat disagree  
■ Totally disagree   
 ■ Don't know

vaccines will be very useful, 17% disagree and 29% do not comment, respectively, against 41%, 20% and 39% of women. Variations observed here according to the age of the respondents are low in amplitude. However, those over 65 estimate more often that mRNA vaccines have allowed to control the epidemic, that they will be useful if a new epidemic breaks out and that this technology is promising for medicine, while those of intermediate ages emphasize more the uncertainty about their long-term effects. Finally, almost a quarter of 18-50 year olds think that these vaccines modify DNA, compared to one in ten over the age of 65.

In addition, executives, the wealthiest and the most qualified emphasize more readily the contributions of these vaccines (control of the epidemic, usefulness in the case of a new epidemic, promises for the medicine of the future). On the other hand, the more worrying opinions are more diffuse. Indeed, opinions on unknown side effects, assimilation to gene therapy and DNA modification vary little, if at all at all according to these categories. For example, the respondents with higher educational attainment are significantly more inclined to judge that these vaccines made it possible to control the Covid-19 epidemic (49%, compared to 36% of the rest of the respondents) and that they will be very useful in the case of a new epidemic ((55%, against 41%), but they also often emphasize ignorance about the long term side effects (62%, with or without higher education diploma) and are barely fewer in number thinking that these vaccines modify DNA (17% versus 21%).

## The ICOVAC project

The ICOVAC project (Impact of COVID-19 on vaccination in France, ANRS 0344 ICOVAC-France / CAPNET) pursues two main objectives: continue to monitor and document vaccine issues in the coming years around Covid-19; study the impact of this crisis on the debates, attitudes and behaviours towards vaccination in general and other existing or future vaccines. This project is deployed along four axes. The first axis reinvestigates contemporary vaccine issues by general population. The second is devoted to collective mobilizations and to public debates around these issues, while the third focuses on health professionals. Finally, the fourth axis brings together the actions which aim to structure research in Human and Social Sciences (SHS) on vaccine issues: the creation and management of the shs&vaccination network are part of this axis.

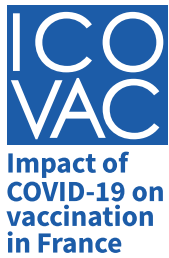
This project has been labeled a National Research Priority by the ad hoc national steering committee for therapeutic trials and other research on COVID-19 (CAPNET).

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## ICOVAC - Wave 1 survey

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