ROOTED IN TRUST

Rooted in Trust (RiT) is a USAID BHA-funded project run by Internews to support humanitarian, public health agencies and local media to strengthen information ecosystems and respond to the spread of rumors and misinformation about emerging health topics. This regular collection of community insights aims to provide humanitarian and public health agencies with ideas to integrate and align their risk communication activities with community perspectives and provide information according to the needs of the community. In Afghanistan, Internews is collaborating with local media partners and the Risk Communication and Community Engagement Sub-Working Group (RCCE SWG).

The rumors highlighted in this bulletin are some of the most relevant examples of rumors that were collected by Internews in Dari, Pashto and English from social media spaces and from the communities through Focus Group Discussions from January to June 2023. Overall, Internews recorded a total of 1352 rumors captured both in social media and in person during the first half of the year.

POLIO SITUATION OVERVIEW

As of June 2023, Afghanistan and Pakistan are the only two nations in the world with active polio endemic. Efforts have been continued to eradicate polio from the country, but due to the political instability, social and economic challenges, and the weak health system, the efforts have not been successful yet. All these issues have limited vaccinations efforts, leaving children at risk to the impacts of this devastating disease. Some public figures that support eradication of polio have been killed, so the fear remains a key concern and most successors are still scared to endorse polio vaccination in communities. The emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic, interrupted polio vaccination campaigns, which added to immunity gaps and have resulted in an increase in polio cases in the country. [1][2]

Afghanistan remains a challenging environment for the polio campaign organizers. UNICEF and WHO are able to conduct door-to-door vaccination campaigns only in 70% of the country, while in remaining 30% the campaigns are conducted in areas such as, mosques and health clinics, which only reaches up to 60% of the children in those areas. This means that close to 40% of children in those areas are not reached by vaccination campaigns. The restrictions on door-to-door vaccination exists in southern and northeastern regions. UNICEF aims to immunize 10 million children under the age of five for each national polio campaign. However, only 8.5 to 9 million children have been reached in each campaign due to restrictions.[3]

In 2021, four cases of poliovirus were reported in Afghanistan, while there were 56 confirmed cases in 2020.[4] According to reports, as of 19 June, five polio cases have been reported in 2023. All the five reported cases are from Nangarhar, where a girl child has died after being infected by poliovirus.[5]

Unfortunately, during the nationwide polio vaccination campaign in 2022, eight members of the polio vaccination campaign were brutally killed in northern Kunduz and Takhar provinces on 24 February 2022. [6]
The virus that causes polio is a very contagious illness. In just a few hours, it can completely paralyze a person after invading the nerve system. Kids under the age of five are most commonly affected by polio. Unvaccinated individuals, however, might get the illness at any age.[11]

In February 2014, the world’s leading Islamic scholars, led by the Grand Imam of the Holy Mosque of Mecca, stated that protection against diseases is obligatory and admissible under Islamic Shariah, and that any actions which do not support these preventive measures and cause harm to humanity are un-Islamic. [12]

Religious scholars from Afghanistan and Pakistan urged Muslim parents to vaccinate their children against polio, stating that “polio vaccines are not only safe and in compliance with Islamic principles, but also a religious and moral duty incumbent on all parents.”[13]

There is concern among Muslims that pork gelatin has been used in vaccine production and might be haram. As consuming pork is haram and not allowed under Islamic law. [10]

Majority of the Afghan people live in rural area and strongly rely on information they receive from religious leaders. People can easily believe that vaccination campaigns are the West political projects to sterilize population in Muslim countries.

According to WHO, “There are no products, materials or contents of porcine origin in the oral polio vaccine.”[14]

Children in Malaysia have received free vaccination injections through the National Children’s Immunization Program since the 1950s. The eradication polio through vaccination, which included Malaysia, was a huge achievement. In 1988, there were 350,000 cases of poliomyelitis, which results in physical deformity in children, but by 2012, there were none.[15]
The Oral Polio Vaccine (OPV) is a mixture of live weakened poliovirus strains from each of the three serotypes that have been chosen for their capacity to imitate the immune response that results from infection with wild polioviruses, but with a significantly reduced chance of spreading to the central nervous system. It does not include pork elements.

Three or more spaced doses of OPV are required to generate adequate levels of seroconversion. The action of oral polio vaccine (OPV) is two-pronged. OPV produces antibodies in the blood (‘humoral’ or serum immunity) to all three types of poliovirus, and in the event of infection, this protects the individual against polio paralysis by preventing the spread of poliovirus to the nervous system.

Polio vaccines have played a crucial role in preventing paralytic polio and are available in two types: inactivated polio vaccine (IPV) and oral polio vaccine (OPV). IPV is an inactivated (killed) vaccine developed by Dr. Jonas Salk, while OPV is a live attenuated (weakened) vaccine developed by Dr. Albert Sabin. Both vaccines are highly effective against all three types of poliovirus, but they differ in their mechanisms of action, safety, and efficacy. These vaccines represent significant medical breakthroughs in the 20th century and have been instrumental in providing protection against poliovirus infection.[17]

Rumor #2

“So far, I have not received a convincing answer from any doctor about the [Polio] vaccine, or which ingredients the vaccine contains. So, how can I believe that it increases or decreases immunity?”

Why is this important?

Although, in the past 20 years, efforts have been made by the Ministry of Public Health of Afghanistan, World Health Organization, UNICEF and dozens of other humanitarian organizations to eradicate polio in Afghanistan, but the lack of access to health centers, false beliefs and the low level of awareness of several families about vaccination, especially polio vaccine, have caused many children to become paralyzed.

Militant and some other groups who oppose mass immunization campaigns have spread rumors that the polio vaccine has dangerous side effects and could be harmful. This has already had negative impact on immunization programs and made it difficult to eradicate poliovirus in rural areas of the country. [16]

In remote areas of Afghanistan, access to accurate and reliable information about vaccines may be limited and not in local languages. This can lead to misconceptions and rumors circulating within communities, as individuals may not have received proper education or communication about the polio vaccine and its ingredients.

The concern about not receiving convincing answers from doctors is indicating a communication gap between healthcare providers and individuals seeking information.

Fact Checking

- The Oral Polio Vaccine (OPV) is a mixture of live weakened poliovirus strains from each of the three serotypes that have been chosen for their capacity to imitate the immune response that results from infection with wild polioviruses, but with a significantly reduced chance of spreading to the central nervous system. It does not include pork elements.

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Recommendations

- Work with local health workers to increase awareness within the communities about the polio vaccine’s ingredients and its impact on human body.

- Work with national and local media such as, TOLO TV, Shamshad TV and Radio Killid to raise awareness about benefits of the vaccine and highlight the stories of those infected by the poliovirus. Through media awareness campaigns parents should be encouraged to vaccinate their children.

- Bridge the communication gap between healthcare providers and the public by ensuring that doctors and healthcare professionals are equipped with comprehensive knowledge about the polio vaccine. Encourage healthcare providers to address concerns and provide clear explanations about vaccine ingredients, efficacy, and safety to build trust and address any doubts or skepticism.

- Improve access to accurate and reliable information about vaccines in remote areas. Establish channels for disseminating information, such as mobile clinics, community health workers, and educational materials in local languages, to reach communities with limited access to health centers.

- It is crucial for healthcare professionals to effectively communicate with the public, addressing their questions and providing clear explanations about vaccine ingredients, efficacy, and safety. Failure to provide satisfactory answers can contribute to doubts and skepticism.
The oral drop-form of the polio vaccine, which combines one, two, or three strains of live, attenuated poliovirus, is safe and efficacious. OPV has been crucial in the global eradication of wild polioviruses because it prevents the spread of the virus by inducing intestinal immunity.[20]

According to WHO, the polio vaccine does not alter human genes. It works by stimulating the immune system to produce an immune response against the poliovirus.

The polio vaccine, whether it is the inactivated polio vaccine (IPV) or the oral polio vaccine (OPV), works by stimulating the immune system to recognize and defend against the poliovirus. It does not alter or modify a person's genetic material. The vaccine contains either inactivated or weakened forms of the poliovirus that prompt the immune system to produce protective antibodies, providing immunity against future polio infection. The vaccine’s mechanism of action is focused on the immune response and does not involve any genetic alteration. [21]

With any medicine, including vaccines, there is a chance of side effects. These are usually mild and go away on their own, but serious reactions are also possible. Polio vaccine side effects include fever and redness or soreness at the injection site. There is a very small chance of an allergic reaction with any vaccine. [22]
We would love your feedback on this product! Contact us also to join our mailing list, collaborate and share data. Please contact Mir Rohullah Sadat, Project Manager Rooted in Trust
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