COVID-19 vaccine acceptance in older Syrian refugees in Lebanon: findings from a longitudinal survey

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BACKGROUND

- The Arab region, which hosts one of the largest refugee populations globally, has very low COVID-19 vaccine acceptance rates.
- Understanding barriers to vaccine acceptance is essential to achieve COVID-19 herd immunity worldwide. This is essential for refugees who are disproportionately affected.

**Aim**

To examine the prevalence and predictors of COVID-19 vaccine refusal in older Syrian refugees who are beneficiaries of a humanitarian organization in Lebanon.

**METHODS**

Design: nested cross-sectional study within a four-wave panel study that aimed to track older Syrian refugees’ vulnerability to COVID-19.

Sampling frame: a complete listing of beneficiary households of a humanitarian organization with an adult aged 50 years or older, residing in informal tented settlements (ITS) or localities in the North, South, and Bekaa governorates in Lebanon.

Sample: 3,174 Syrian refugees (50 years and older), were interviewed between January 21 and April 23, 2021; 2,942 were re-interviewed one month later.

Outcome: Intention to be vaccinated against COVID-19 was assessed using the following question: “Now that a safe and effective COVID-19 vaccine arrived to Lebanon and is offered for free, would you take it?”

Analysis: The sample was divided into a development and validation cohort. Multivariable logistic regression models were used to identify predictors for COVID-19 vaccine refusal using STATA/SE 17.0.

RESULTS

- Among beneficiaries, 61% intended to receive the COVID-19 vaccine, 31% had no intention to be vaccinated and 7% were undecided.
- Only 6% were registered on a national platform to receive the COVID-19 vaccine.
- Top three reasons for not registering for the COVID-19 vaccine were: being unsure about how to register (36%), not wanting to receive the vaccine (32.5%), and being unsure whether to take the vaccine (21%).
- In an unadjusted analysis, COVID-19 vaccine refusal was statistically significantly higher among females and those living outside ITS than inside ITS.
- Refugees aged 70 years and older and those reporting chronic conditions did not significantly differ from younger participants or those without chronic conditions in their vaccine acceptance.

CONCLUSION

- Enhancing vaccine acceptance and registration among Syrian refugees is needed for equitable vaccination.
- This model, which shows a reasonably good model performance, identified significant predictors of vaccine refusal among refugees.
- These included: female gender, not adhering to COVID-19 preventive measures particularly receiving visitors at home, and perceiving vaccines as not safe.
- In Lebanon, where Syrian refugees experience security, mobility, and healthcare access barriers, delivery of immunization services to older refugees inside and outside ITS is paramount.
- Disseminating accurate, accessible, and culturally appropriate information about vaccine safety and effectiveness is essential.
- Removing barriers to registration and access is required.

FUNDING SOURCE

For comments and questions email: ne61@aub.edu.lb