

Chinese politics & policy

China offers Covid vaccine insurance to win over jab sceptics

Despite lack of evidence, some people have claimed they developed leukaemia after being inoculated



Less than two-thirds of Chinese citizens aged 60 or older have received a booster shot © Hu Chengwei/Getty Images

Sun Yu in Beijing YESTERDAY

China has devised a new incentive to boost elderly vaccinations to levels that could finally allow the country to relax its zero-Covid strategy and revive the economy: insurance packages for people worried about jab-related side effects.

Dozens of cities across the country have begun offering people aged 60 and older free insurance that pays out up to Rmb500,000 (\$75,000) if they fall ill — or worse — because of [Covid-19 vaccines](#).

The packages also promise payouts to families if it can be proven that a loved one's death was related to receiving a jab. In Beijing alone, about 60,000 seniors have signed up for the coverage since April.

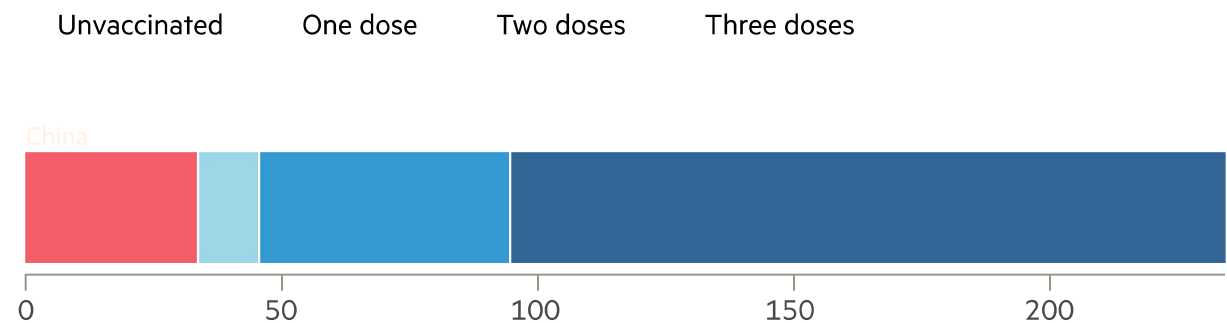
As in other countries, a large number of people in [China](#) harbour doubts about the safety of the vaccines despite a lack of evidence of a high risk of serious side effects.

But government officials and the country's strictly controlled media shy away from discussing even routine side effects, which can include shortlived fevers, soreness and other relatively mild reactions.

This has, paradoxically, created a vacuum in which unsubstantiated rumours about alleged links between vaccines and serious diseases such as leukaemia and type 1 diabetes have spread widely on Chinese social media.

China's 95mn elderly people are still under-vaccinated

Population aged 60 and above by vaccination status as of June 4 (mn)



Source: China's National Health Commission • FT Data: Andy Lin / @imandylin2

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“The US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention has gone to great lengths in making public information about health problems associated with Covid vaccines,” said a Beijing-based immunologist, who asked not to be named because of the sensitivity of the subject. “[But China] is focused on painting the picture of a 100 per cent risk-free vaccine that doesn’t exist in reality.”

As of May 5, less than two-thirds of Chinese citizens aged 60 or older [had received a booster shot](#), as recommended by the World Health Organization. To achieve herd immunity, it is estimated that 80 per cent of the entire population needs a third dose.

About 100mn Chinese are estimated to be either unvaccinated or under-vaccinated, sparking fears that there could be millions of hospitalisations and deaths if President Xi Jinping relaxes [the country’s zero-Covid strategy](#).

“We want to make people feel more comfortable about taking the jab,” said an official at a People’s Insurance Company of China branch in Zhaoqing, Guangdong province, which offers vaccine-related coverage.

While generally less effective than western alternatives, Chinese Covid vaccines do offer substantial protection against serious illness and death.

But officials are wary of forcing people, especially the elderly, to get vaccinated because any adverse side effects risk sparking social unrest.

Xi’s administration said it has [stemmed the large outbreak in Shanghai](#) this spring — and prevented a similar one from emerging in Beijing. The lockdowns have buffeted

and prevented a similar one from emerging in Beijing. The lockdowns have hurt business, raising concerns over the long-term effects of the zero-Covid strategy on the economy, but the government appears intent on keeping the country sealed off from the outside world at least until the middle of 2023.

China announced that it would not host Asia's premier club football championship next year as scheduled, despite having successfully staged the Winter Olympics in a tightly sealed "closed loop" in February. On Monday, organisers of the Shanghai International Film Festival said the event would be delayed until next year.

Some people who said they developed leukaemia after being vaccinated posted their accounts online and asked authorities to investigate a possible link between the jobs and their condition, even though they had been told by medical professionals that there was no evidence of such a connection.

In an internal circular issued in March by the National Health Commission that was seen by the Financial Times, the regulator asked authorities in 19 provinces to pay "special attention" to people who developed leukaemia after receiving Covid vaccines. This was because some of them were forming groups on social media that might "affect social stability".

Some Chinese medical experts and insurance executives were also critical of what they said was a lack of transparency in the NHC's medical data about "adverse events" that might be connected to vaccinations. While regulators in the US publicise such data, their Chinese counterparts generally do not.

That has deepened doubts among vaccine-hesitant people in China and raised questions about whether insurance holders who suffered a legitimate adverse event — or their families — would ever be able to prove it and collect on their policies.

"Doctors don't dare to connect [adverse events to vaccines] even if they see a possibility," said a PICC executive in Beijing. "The top priority is to boost vaccination rates and anything that could undermine the goal must go away."

Additional reporting by Tom Mitchell in Singapore

