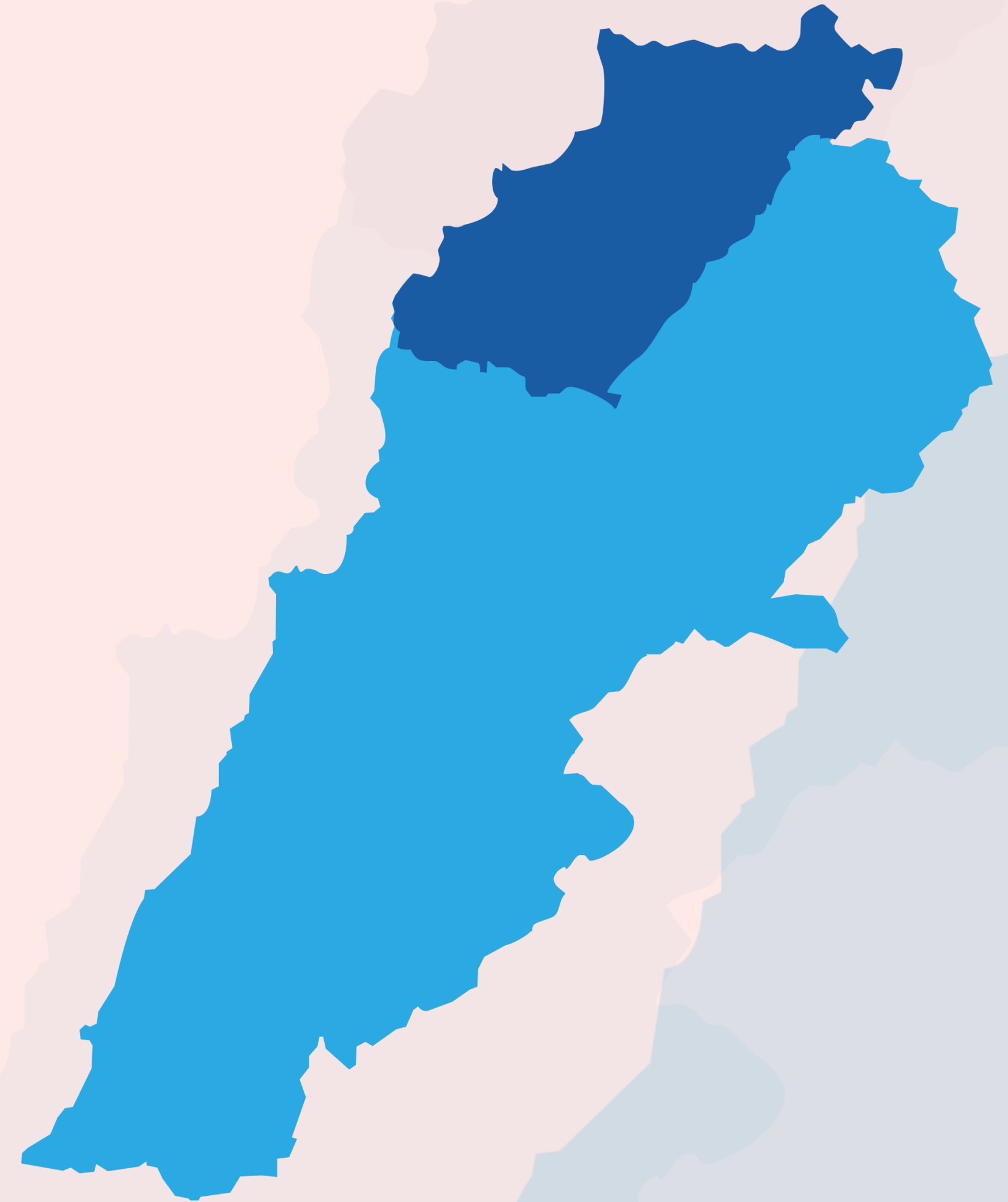


ROOTED IN TRUST 2.0

Maharat has prepared this media bulletin in cooperation with Internews as part of the Rooted in Trust 2.0 project. Maharat's team of social media monitors continues to collect rumors linked to COVID-19 on various Lebanese platforms. These rumor trends are then analyzed and fact-checked by the Maharat News team.



What are the people saying?

RUMOR #1

”

Receiving a dose of Moderna vaccine has potential side effects and a high risk on our health in the short and long run due to the distribution of an expired batch of this vaccine to the citizens



The claim shared on Twitter

Al-Mayadeen TV published (1) on its Twitter account on April 4, 2022, a short video of an interview with the former Lebanese Minister of Public Health Hamad Hassan, saying that: “As we saw in the media that the American embassy provided the first batch of Moderna vaccines arriving on January 9, 2022, yet this batch was expired. This had a significant negative impact on the community immunization process, particularly when citizens discovered that the vaccines had expired during their vaccination procedure.”

Hassan added: "They later argued that they had obtained an approval from Moderna's company stating that the vaccines were not expired and yet can be used for an additional two months. However, considering this batch invalid and expired, the World Health Organization rejected to cover the logistical expenses that were spent within the vaccination centers undertaking the Moderna vaccine."

Finally, Hassan addressed a statement from this incident, saying: "The Islamic Republic of Iran, at the peak of its crisis, sent us 50 to 60 respirators, while other countries are sending us expired vaccines."



What are the effects and risks of this rumor?

Believing this rumor may lead to major panic and fear among citizens who were vaccinated with the Moderna vaccines, and the majority may resort to taking medications and/or apply inaccurate medical solutions to reduce any negative side effects that may result on their health in the future.

THE FACTS


- On January 26, 2022, the US Ambassador (2) to Lebanon Dorothy Shea, accompanied by Dr. Fadi Sinan, representing the Minister of Public Health, Dr. Firas Abyad, and a number of stakeholders, launched a vaccination campaign with the Moderna vaccine against the Covid-19 pandemic, at Heikal Hospital in Tripoli.
- The United States, through the US Agency for International Development (USAID), donated more than 600,000 vaccines, with the aim of supporting the Lebanese government within their national vaccination strategy against the COVID-19 pandemic.
- This donation raised a wave of skepticism within the context of electoral campaigns and political propaganda.
- Among these campaigns was what the former Minister of Public Health, Hamad Hassan, said in terms of comparing the American gift to the Iranian one.




On the validity and expiry date of Moderna vaccine

After undertaking discussions between the British National Health Agency with Moderna's company, (3) the agency decided to extend the validity date of the Moderna vaccine by 30 to 60 days.


In a file dedicated to the Moderna vaccine, the World Health Organization (4) stated that the validity period of this vaccine is 9 months, provided that it is stored at a temperature between $-20^{\circ} \pm 5^{\circ}\text{C}$. And this decision has been effective since December 2021.



In addition, the European Medicines Agency (EMA) (5) has issued an updated report on the Moderna vaccine, allowing the vaccine to be used for 9 months instead of 7 months.




Moreover, Moderna's company (6) has agreed to extend the expiry dates of the distributed vaccines whenever it has been stored at a freezing temperature of $(-25^{\circ}\text{C}$ to $-15^{\circ}\text{C})$. and gave the updated dates for the validity of the vaccines, so that the validity of the vaccine is extended by two additional months: for example, if the validity expires in January 2022, it becomes and remains valid until March 2022.



This has been implemented in many countries. Particularly, on March 3, 2022, the Vietnamese Pharmaceutical Administration of the Ministry of Public Health (7) agreed to extend the validity period of the Moderna vaccines imported from March 2nd into the country.

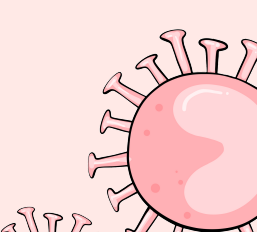
On the validity of the Moderna vaccines imported to Lebanon

Taking into account the campaigns questioning the validity of the vaccines donated by the US Embassy in January 2022 to Lebanon, the media office of the Lebanese Ministry of Public Health (8) issued on the first of March 2022, a statement in which the Ministry stressed that the vaccines that were received in a donation of four hundred and twenty-nine thousand doses of the Moderna vaccine during last January, are within their validity period, specifically since the validity of the Moderna vaccines has been extended for an additional two months, or nine months from the date of their production.



The statement added (9) that these skeptical news regarding the vaccines campaign or its effectiveness does not serve the community immunization process that the ministry seeks to increase in this stage preceding the spring and summer holidays.

Therefore, what was stated by the former Minister of Public Health, Hamad Hassan, was incorrect, specifically in terms of him suggesting that Moderna company gave a special approval to extend the validity of the vaccine for a period of two months, while this extension was approved by all reliable global health agencies, including the World Health Organization. Furthermore, the minister's words were inconsistent compared to the statement of the Lebanese Ministry of Public Health, which confirmed in March 2022 that the validity of the vaccine has not yet expired.



TIPS FOR JOURNALISTS



- Do not be directly swayed by statements addressed by politicians or news as you receive it, yet fact check the correctness and accuracy of the data specifically that some of those statements might carry political agendas and might fall under political propaganda particularly in elections campaigning times.
- Rely on scientific studies and communiques conducted by international health institutions and organizations regarding any data on COVID-19 vaccines.
- Examine and verify the strategies of the Ministry of Public Health related to the vaccination and community immunization processes, and its compatibility with the standards of the World Health Organization in terms of vaccines distribution and usage.
- Double check any health information from several reliable sources, without relying only on opinion-based data from experts or laborers within the health sector.

MEDIA PRINCIPLES

- Journalists should shed light on the import and distributional processes of the vaccines within specific mechanisms that match the internationally approved standards.
- In addition, Journalists shouldn't publish opinion-based or inaccurate data regarding the validity or effectiveness of vaccines without referring to the competent health bodies and organizations and/or to scientific medical studies, in order to verify the accuracy of the information or news, especially when these opinions contradict the official sources of health information.



What are the people saying?

RUMOR #2

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New dangerous COVID variants from Omicron's strain are spreading among citizens in multiple countries carrying the symptoms of the flu

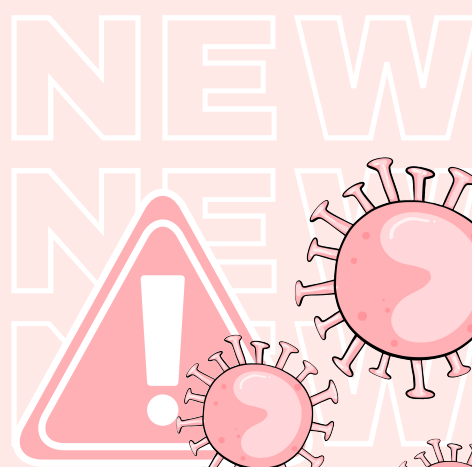


The News posted on the Website

“News 24/7” published an article (10) issuing the UK’s announcement of a new variant of the omicron XE strain, whose symptoms are very similar to those of the flu. This news coincided with India's announcement of its first reported case of the new variant, Omicron XE19, in its financial capital, Mumbai.

What are the effects and risks of this rumor?

Believing the claim that the new Omicron variant is like the flu could cause panic among people who could catch a flu and assume it is COVID XE. This could lead people to take the wrong medications or treatments. There is no official data regarding flu-like symptoms. Only take the word of authorized international organizations regarding new COVID variants and their symptoms.



THE FACTS

- The British government's (11) website published an article summarizing the new variants of the Coronavirus. Thirty-eight cases of the XF variant consisting of the delta strain and an omicron BA.1 variant were identified and detected.
- As for The XD variant also deriving from Delta and Omicron has not been identified in the UK so far, although 49 cases have been reported in global databases, mostly in France.
- Yet, a total of 637 cases of the XE variant (12) from omicron BA.1 and BA.2 strains have been confirmed in the UK. In fact, the first case was reported on January 19, 2022.
- Particularly, a “recombinant variant” (13) is created when an individual is infected with two or more variants at the same time, causing a fusion within their genetic compositions inside the patient's body.
- “Recombinant variants” are not an unusual event, particularly when there are multiple variants in circulation, many of which have been identified over the course of the pandemic so far, said Susan Hopkins, chief medical adviser at the UK's Health Security Agency. (14) As with other types of variants, most will disappear relatively quickly.
- In addition, the World Health Organization stresses (15) that such strains as XE variant should be monitored by public health authorities as distinct strains, and comparative evaluations of their viral characteristics should be made.
- Moreover, the World Health Organization, through its account on Twitter, (16) published a short video of Dr. Maria Van Kerkhove's, in which she stated that the XE variant is among the Omicron strains, and that all necessary information will be shared and announced immediately once it is medically received and confirmed upon.
- As for its symptoms, the British newspaper "independent" (17) reported that since the sub-variant is considered a new strain, the situation may change yet XE is not currently believed to bring new symptoms. The most common symptoms reported are fever, cough, shortness of breath, muscle aches, headache, loss of taste and smell and sore throat.
- Therefore, what was mentioned on "news 24/7" is true regarding the presence of a recombinant omicron (XE) variant, yet new data is still awaited by the official international organizations and centers regarding the presence of any new symptoms.

TIPS FOR JOURNALISTS



- Rely on scientific studies conducted by international health institutions and organizations regarding any data on COVID-19 variants.
- Verify all information issuing symptoms or medications of a new COVID variant with health care professionals and actors.
- Restrain in using and/or publishing misleading and inaccurate headlines or titles to any health subject or article to reduce panic among the public.

MEDIA PRINCIPLES

- Journalists should always be accurately up to date on any changes or events happening within the medical and health sector.
- In addition, Journalists should take the required time in validating all health information related to COVID before sharing it publicly.
- Furthermore, the referral to the competent health centers and organizations and/or to scientific medical studies is a must, to verify the accuracy of the information or news.



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