

26 Jul 2021 |

Low Sinopharm Protection In Elderly Casts New Doubt On Chinese COVID-19 Vaccines

New Real World Study Adds To Debate

by **Brian Yang**

A new study in over 400 people reignites fears about the apparent low efficacy of Chinese COVID-19 vaccines, especially among the elderly, and adding to the debate around the need for booster shots.

A recent study conducted in 450 people in Hungary shows that a China-developed COVID-19 vaccine from [Sinopharm Group Co. Ltd.](#) has a much lower efficacy in the elderly compared with other recipients.

The study took blood samples at least two weeks after the second shot and found that, while 90% of under 50-year-old participants developed antibodies against SARS-CoV-2, only 50% of those aged over 80 had these. As an indication of immune response, a low level of antibodies suggests vulnerability to infection, a consideration taking on additional importance amid surging global infections with the more transmissible and contagious Delta variant.

The new study was posted online by two Hungarian scientists and has not been peer-reviewed.

Hungary was the first EU member state to approve the Sinopharm vaccine and Budapest has promoted inoculation with it in a high-profile campaign, in which the country's president received the jab in a televised event. Considering its EU status, Hungary was hailed as a first entry for the Chinese vaccine in the world's largest economic bloc.

Since then, one million people in the country have received the inactivated whole virus Sinopharm vaccine, mostly the elderly, and the concern for breakthrough infections in fully-vaccinated individuals is high. Some people are now reportedly crossing the border to neighboring Romania to get shots of [Pfizer Inc./BioNTech SE](#)'s mRNA vaccine.

Booster Shots Needed?

Hungary is among several countries that have reported real world data showing efficacy rates lower than previously reported for Chinese COVID-19 vaccines.

State-owned Sinopharm's inactivated virus vaccines had earlier been reported to offer 70% overall protection, while that from another major Chinese developer, [Sinovac Biotech Ltd.](#), had a reported 50.6% efficacy rate.

The Seychelles has one of the highest vaccination rates in the world — 68% of its 98,000 population have received both jabs, achieving the government's herd immunity target of a 70% rate. The two vaccines used in the campaign were from Sinopharm (donated by the United Arab Emirates) and the Covishield [AstraZeneca PLC](#) vaccine manufactured by [Serum Institute of India Pvt. Ltd.](#) and gifted by the Indian government.

But since reopening its borders, the Seychelles has seen a spike in new infections and reported six deaths among these fully vaccinated, according to a 1 July press briefing. Out of these, five were said to have received Covishield and one the Sinopharm shot. Among all the vaccinated people in the island nation, 57% have received the Sinopharm vaccine, with most over 60 years old receiving Covishield.

The fresh data from Hungary add to the discussions around the need for booster shots for the vaccines from China, which is itself on the cusp of approving the BioNTech mRNA vaccine, licensed locally to [Shanghai Fosun Pharmaceutical \(Group\) Co., Ltd.](#) The timing of the approval is still uncertain but experts point to a need for boosters given a rise in locally transmitted cases.

Nanjing in China had reported 39 new infections as of 25 July, taking its total of new confirmed cases to 741. Despite the government maintaining strict controls over overseas visitors, the breakthrough infections in some people fully-vaccinated with domestic vaccines adds to a possible need for booster shots, for which China's government has so far not issued any official rules.

Fosun-BioNTech mRNA Vaccine Nears China Green Light

By [Brian Yang](#)

16 Jul 2021

There is talk about offering booster shots to people who have already been fully vaccinated against COVID-19 in China and it's increasingly clear that the mRNA vaccine from BioNTech/Fosun nearing approval could be the answer. Meanwhile, some Asian countries are turning away from Chinese coronavirus vaccines.

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Sinopharm has not yet released any statement about the new Hungary data. In a post on social media platform WeChat, the company said, given there are over 15,000 confirmed cases and 68 deaths in the Seychelles, the protection rate for its vaccine is "roughly 70-80%."