



Weekly Briefing

**Latvia social briefing:
Covid-19 crisis as the biggest challenge for the mental
and physical health of Latvian society**

Nina Linde


China-CEE Institute

Kiadó: Kína-KKE Intézet Nonprofit Kft.

Szerkesztésért felelős személy: Chen Xin

Kiadásért felelős személy: Huang Ping

 1052 Budapest Petőfi Sándor utca 11.

 +36 1 5858 690

 office@china-cee.eu

 china-cee.eu

Covid-19 crisis as the biggest challenge for the mental and physical health of Latvian society

Introduction

During any crisis, it is important to control mental and physical health in society. It is not a secret that people's behaviour or even mood in society can directly influence the economic and financial situation in the country. Therefore, it is needed to develop tools that can track the situation. The most obvious option now is population surveying, using this method it is possible to get the information from the citizens themselves.

Also, the significant aspect is to maintain and improve mental and physical health, when needed. Unfortunately, now the methods for this issue are not well-developed in Latvia. At the same time, Latvian residents are losing trust in the government and the level of anxiety is rising. Constant changes in the restrictive measures cause worrying in society. Also, some people are lost in the Covid-19 updates and tired of the continuous pressure. Besides, the only way out from the Covid-19 crisis is the vaccination of the population but in the country, there are serious issues with vaccination schedule and lack of vaccines in general, especially considering that AstraZeneca vaccine, which has the biggest share in the Latvian vaccine purchase, is now being tested and temporarily prohibited for use. Meanwhile, more than a half of the population is ready to be vaccinated.

Mental and physical health of society

The rapid spread of Covid-19 and the exceptional circumstances in the country pose a serious challenge not only to pharmacists, doctors and society as a whole but also to people's psychological and emotional well-being. Therefore, in order to find out the population's self-assessment of stress during Covid-19 and to provide valuable and evidence-based recommendations for improving emotional and mental well-being from Latvia's doctors and experts, a research project has been launched in Latvia - BENU Pharmacy Stress Thermometer.¹ In the questionnaire participated 1713 respondents.

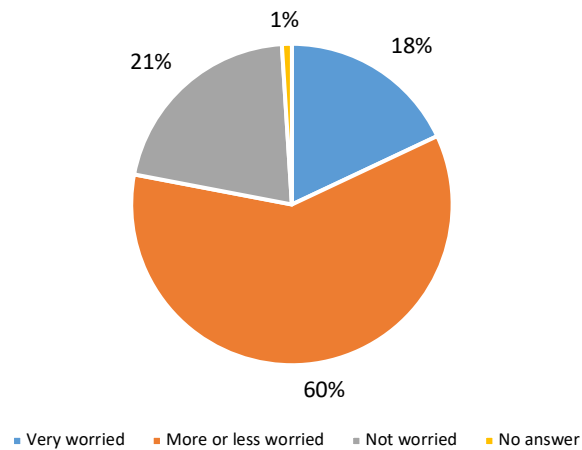


Figure 1. Level of anxiety self-assessment in Latvia

Source: BENU Pharmacy Stress Thermometer

Latvian residents were asked to give a self-assessment of their level of anxiety about the prevalence of Covid-19 in Latvia and the world on a 10-point scale (mark 1 - not worried at all, 10 - very worried). The results show that 18% are very worried about the prevalence of the disease (rated 9 or 10), 60% of respondents are more or less worried (scores 5 to 8), while 21% of respondents have reported their level of anxiety below 4. Pandemic has influenced people's life considerably, and as it can be seen almost 80% of the respondents are still worried because of the virus's spreading.

The results also reveal that the three most important causes of stress for Latvians are fear of their own and their relatives' health (71%), irresponsibility of the public towards the set restrictions (64%), as well as the situation at work - possible job loss, loss of salary or loss of business (42%).

Another notable finding in this research is that 37% of Latvians reduced their level of physical activity during the Covid-19 pandemic period.ⁱⁱ The most affected are young people at the age of 18-24, 46% of them stated that their physical activity has decreased. Besides, males are influenced more than females, a decrease in physical activity for males – 41%, while for females 33%. Also, 31% of males and 23% of females noted that they spend less time outdoor than before Covid-19. In general, for 46% of residents, the time spent in the fresh air did not change, while 26% began to be outdoors less often.

The good news is that 25% of respondents stated that they began to be outdoors more often than before, wherein 10% much more often and 15% a little more often. In addition, 16% of Latvians revealed that their physical activity has increased.

The results of the research showed that all three options are possible during the pandemic, people can increase their activity and spend more time outdoors or maintain the regular way of life, and finally, some of the residents are not able to maintain their pre-Covid habits and reduce both physical activity and time spent outdoors. Here it is important to understand that the government, in general, is promoting outdoor physical activity for citizens but due to different reasons not all people want to follow this call as the weather is still unpredictable and in the combination with a high level of anxiety it is not always the option for Latvian residents.

Attitude towards vaccination

Currently, in Latvia, there are problems with vaccination schedule, lack of vaccines, and unresolved issues with AstraZeneca vaccine side effects. However, it is clear that the only way to get back to normal life and rebuild a pre-Covid way of life is to vaccinate the majority of the population or at least those, who agree to be vaccinated. Even though it is challenging for now to understand, when the mass vaccination is over, we can still measure the opinion of Latvian society about vaccination in general.

According to the research company SKDS, where 1005 Latvian residents participated, almost one third (29%) of Latvians plan to use the first opportunity to be vaccinated against Covid-19, while a relatively small number of respondents - 9% of males and 6% of females - strongly oppose vaccination and have expressed the opinion that others should not be vaccinated.ⁱⁱⁱ 36% of respondents could get vaccinated but still want to wait. Besides, 23% of residents would like the opportunity to choose the vaccine against Covid-19.

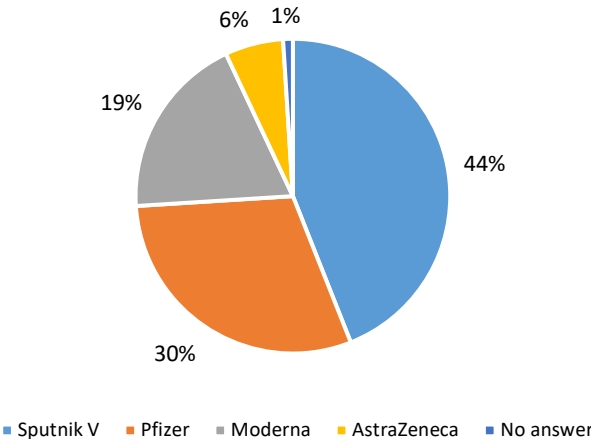


Figure 2. Vaccines by the respondents preference in Latvia

Source: SKDS data

When asked which considerations would be important to the respondent if it were possible to choose a vaccine against Covid-19, 47% of the population answered that the country of production is important. So, 44% would like to be vaccinated with Sputnik V, 30% with Pfizer, 19% with Moderna. Meanwhile, only 6% would like to choose AstraZeneca, which is bought the most in Latvia. It is important to mention that Sputnik V is not yet registered in the EU, however, Latvian people show a considerably high level of trust in this vaccine.

The research shows that people with higher education want to be vaccinated (45%), while only a quarter of people with primary and secondary education would like to do so (25% and 24% correspondently).

The level of trust in government is decreasing and the public is increasingly critical of the information provided by the government in the Covid-19 crisis. The survey found that information was relatively critical, with 65% saying they were tired of Covid-19, which was up 9% from the January survey. Besides, 42% admitted that they no longer know what to believe when it comes to Covid-19, which is also 9% more than in January 2020.

Overall, people are ready to get vaccinated but are not able to do so due to the lack of vaccines and issues with AstraZeneca, which was bought the most. This situation and constant changes in the restrictive measures undermine the credibility of the state to control and cope with Covid-19. People are tired and the level of anxiety is only increasing. The question is what can be done to change the situation and return people's trust? Or is it even an option already?

Summary

To overcome the crisis easier and faster, it is important to control and maintain people's level of mental and physical health. Now 78% of Latvians are worried about the situation with Covid-19 in the country. The tools to reduce the level of anxiety in society are not yet developed here. However, the actions are needed now. One more significant issue today is the constantly decreasing level of trust in the government, as in the emergency situation of the state people need to see reasonable actions from the state officials. Unfortunately, the residents see only constantly changing restrictive measures without any considerable reasons behind them and the level of anxiety is only rising from one survey to another.

People's way of life is also affected by pandemic strongly. As can be seen, Latvians spend less time outdoors and do fewer physical activities. It is difficult for people to find any motivation to develop themselves when the crisis hit the level of anxiety. In general, the

government is trying to promote a more active way of life outdoors but there is no result of these attempts, according to the survey results.

Finally, more than half of the population is ready to get vaccinated, people are waiting for it to get back to the pre-Covid way of life. Unfortunately, the vaccination process is not going smoothly at the moment. Firstly, there is a lack of vaccines in general. Secondly, the vaccination schedule and the process of vaccination itself are not yet flawless, so the pace could be much higher. Thirdly, the AstraZeneca vaccine, which has the biggest share in the country's purchase, is now prohibited for use due to the test of the side effects.

ⁱ Benu Aptieka. (2021). BENU Aptieka uzsāk unikālu pētījumu par iedzīvotāju stresu Covid-19 laikā. Available at: <https://www.benu.lv/jaunumi/benu-aptieka-uzsak-unikalumu-petijumu-par-iedzivotaju-stresu-covid-19-laika.html>

ⁱⁱ Delfi.lv. (14.03.2021). Опрос: 37% населения Латвии уменьшили физическую активность в период пандемии. Available at: <https://rus.delfi.lv/news/daily/latvia/opros-37-naseleniya-latvii-umenshili-fizicheskuyu-aktivnost-v-period-pandemii.d?id=53018445>

ⁱⁱⁱ LSM.lv. (04.03.2020). Aptauija: 29% Latvijas iedzīvotāju vakcinētos pie pirmās izdevības; daudzi grib izvēlēties poti. Available at: https://www.lsm.lv/raksts/zinas/latvija/aptauja-29-latvijas-iedzivotaju-vakcinos-pie-pirmas-izdevibas-daudzi-grib-izveleties-poti.a395373/?utm_source=feedly&utm_campaign=rss&utm_medium=links