

Coronavirus conspiracies and views of vaccination

Sunday 31 January 2021

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Research Council

Introduction

This report includes findings from a survey of 4,860 UK residents aged 18-75 by the University of Bristol and King's College London, conducted between 21 November and 22 December 2020.

Coronavirus conspiracies

Notable minorities of the population have conspiracy suspicions about coronavirus, ranging from the relatively mild – such as that “people need to wake up and start asking questions about the pandemic” (believed by 41%) – to the more extreme, including that “reporters, scientists, and government officials are involved in a conspiracy to cover up important information about the virus” (believed by one in seven [15%]).

There appears to be a link between such suspicions and vaccine hesitancy. For example, while 28% of the public overall believe “legitimate questions about coronavirus are being suppressed by the government, the media, and academia”, this rises to 61% among those who say they are unlikely to or definitely won't get a coronavirus vaccine.

Belief in more concrete conspiracy theories is also relatively widespread, with one in five people saying it's true that “the authorities want us to think that coronavirus is much more dangerous than it really is” (20%) and that “the government is deliberately allowing vulnerable people to die” (19%).

Ethnicity and age

Younger people and people from ethnic minorities are more likely to have conspiracy suspicions and believe conspiracy theories about coronavirus:

- 6% of those from white ethnic groups believe “Bill Gates wants a mass vaccination programme against coronavirus so that he can implant microchips into people”, compared with 19% among those from other ethnic groups.

- 26% of those aged 18 to 34 believe “an impartial, independent investigation of coronavirus would show once and for all that we've been lied to on a massive scale”, while 16% of people aged 55 to 75 say the same.

These kinds of beliefs may be contributing to uncertainty about getting a coronavirus vaccine among some sections of the population...

Vaccine concerns

People from ethnic minorities are much more likely to say that various concerns about a coronavirus vaccine could probably persuade them not to take it. For example, 41% of people from white ethnic groups say potential concerns about how quickly a vaccine was developed are likely to deter them from getting it, compared with 58% of people from other ethnic groups who say the same.

There are also significant differences in how quickly people of different ethnic backgrounds and ages say they would like to be vaccinated.

The link with where people get their information from

People who say they get a great deal or fair amount of their information on coronavirus from certain online sources, including social media platforms, are significantly more likely to have conspiracy suspicions about the pandemic and think various conspiracy theories are true.

Relying on such sources is also associated with far greater levels of potential concern about getting vaccinated against coronavirus. For example, those who get a lot of their information from DuckDuckGo (63%), WhatsApp (55%), Instagram (54%) and YouTube (49%) are more than twice as likely as both the population overall and those who rely on traditional media sources to say that they would probably be put off getting a vaccine if there were concerns that it might overload their immune system.

Conspiracy suspicions about coronavirus

While they are minority beliefs, significant sections of the UK public nonetheless have conspiracy suspicions about coronavirus and the handling of the crisis.

There appears to be a link between such suspicions and vaccine hesitancy, with those who say they're unlikely to or definitely won't get a coronavirus vaccine hugely more likely to hold these beliefs.

People from ethnic minorities are also more likely than those from white ethnic groups to hold these suspicions, and belief in them is largely concentrated among the young.

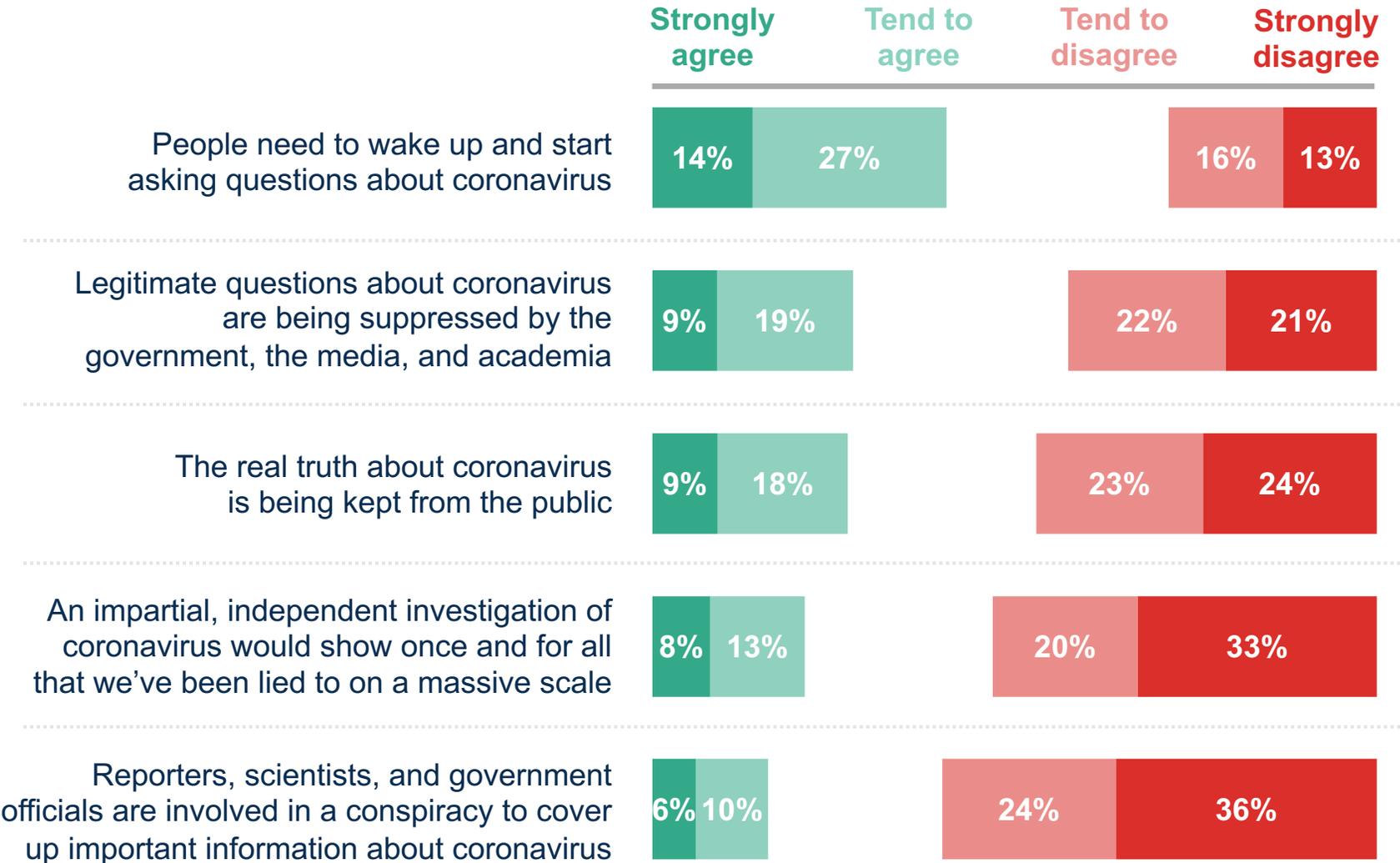
Notable minorities of the population have conspiracy suspicions about coronavirus.

Belief is particularly high in milder suspicions, such as that people need to wake up and start asking questions about the pandemic – believed by 41% – and is much lower for more extreme suspicions.

But even these extreme suspicions are held by significant sections of the public. For example, more than a quarter of people (27%) think the real truth about coronavirus is being kept from the public, and one in seven (15%) think the authorities are involved in a widespread cover-up of key information about the virus.

Note: some figures differ from charts due to rounding.

To what extent, if at all, do you agree or disagree with the following statements?

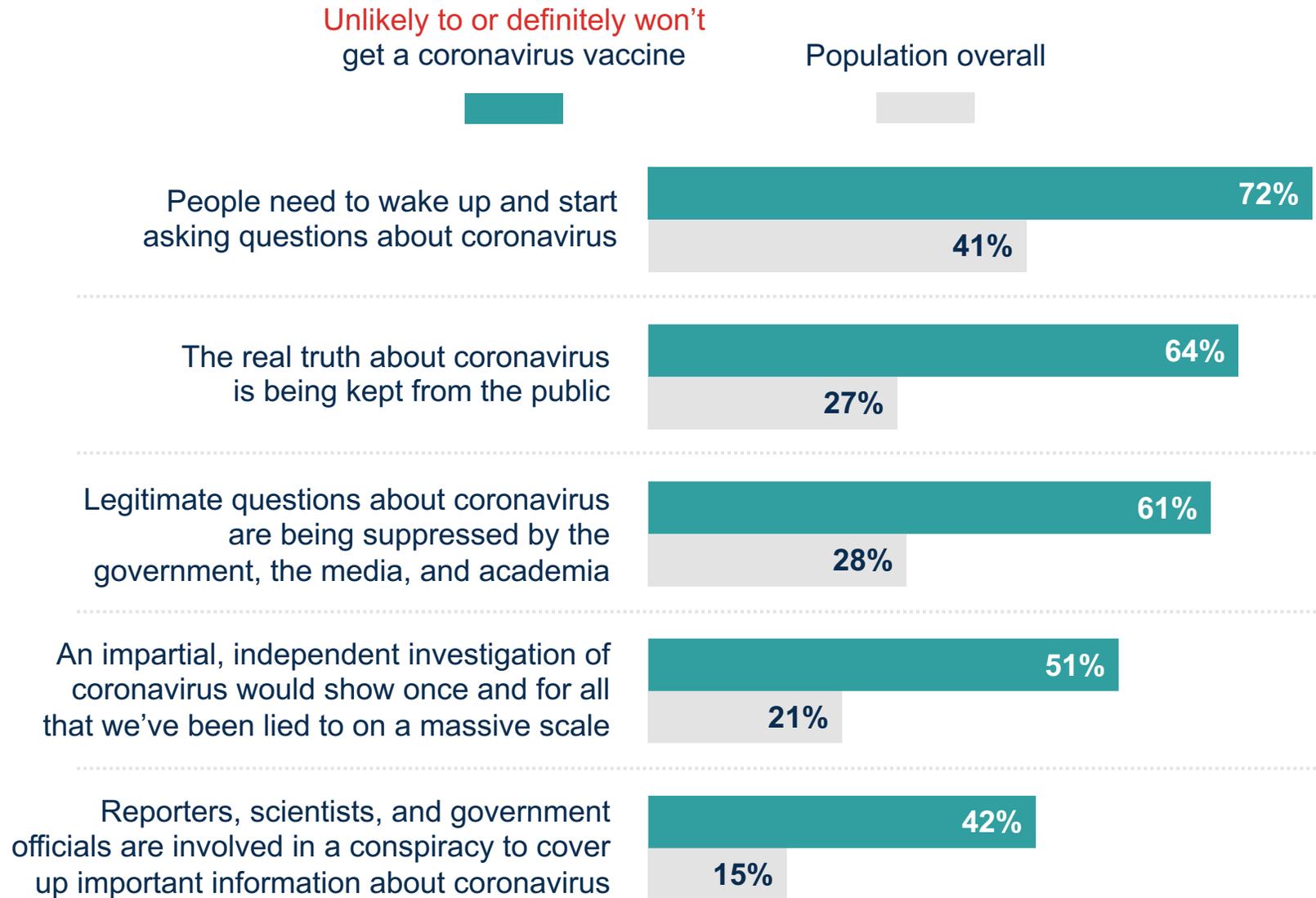


Those who say they're unlikely to or definitely won't get vaccinated against coronavirus are hugely more likely to have conspiracy suspicions about the virus.

These people are more than twice as likely as the public overall to be suspicious about certain aspects of the pandemic.

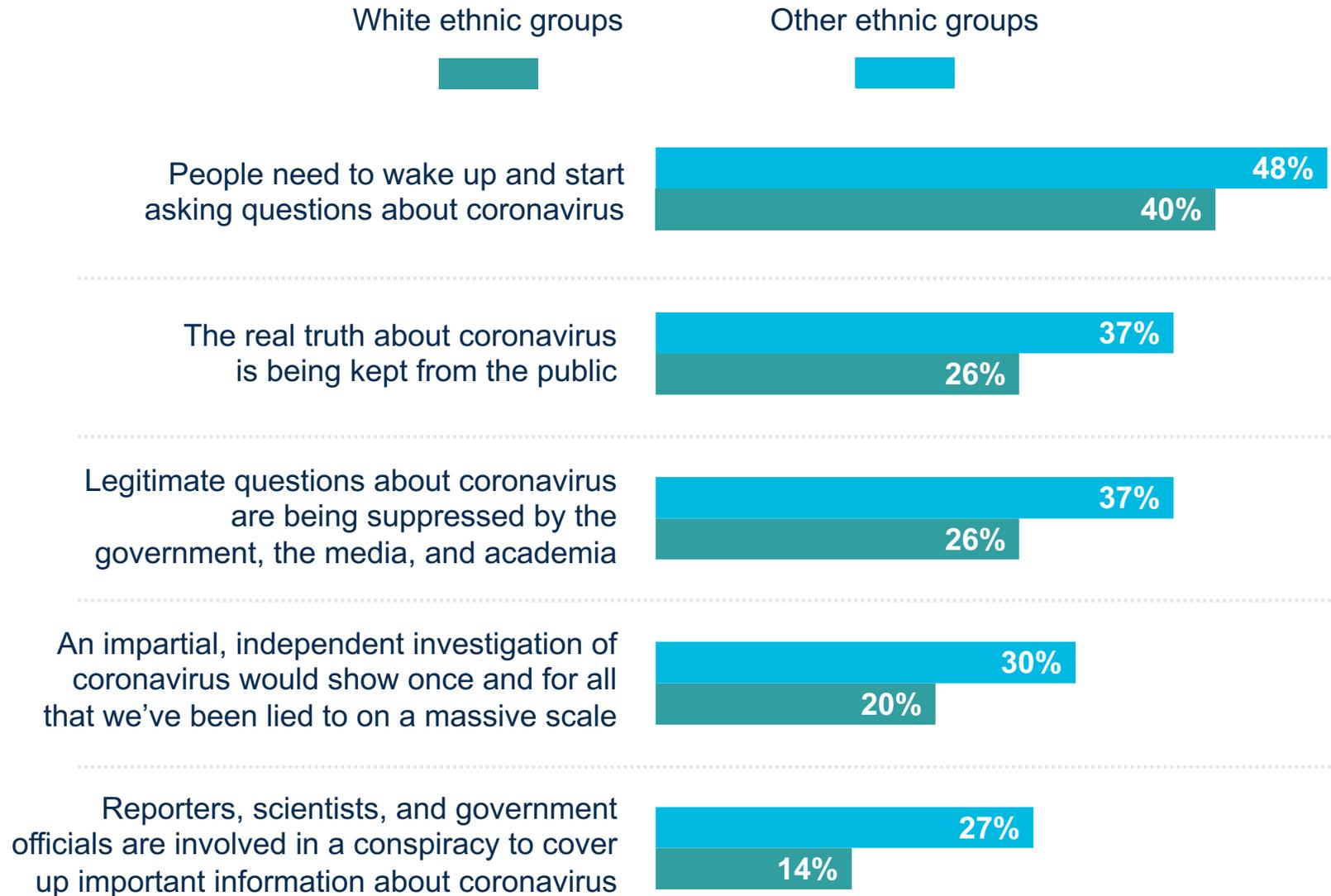
For instance, 42% agree reporters, scientists, and government officials are involved in a conspiracy to cover up important information about coronavirus, compared with 15% of the public who say the same. And 51% think an impartial investigation would reveal we've been lied to on a massive scale about coronavirus, versus 21% among the general public who hold the same view.

% who have conspiracy suspicions about coronavirus



Levels of conspiracy suspicion also differ by race, with people from ethnic minorities more likely than those from white ethnic groups to hold such views.

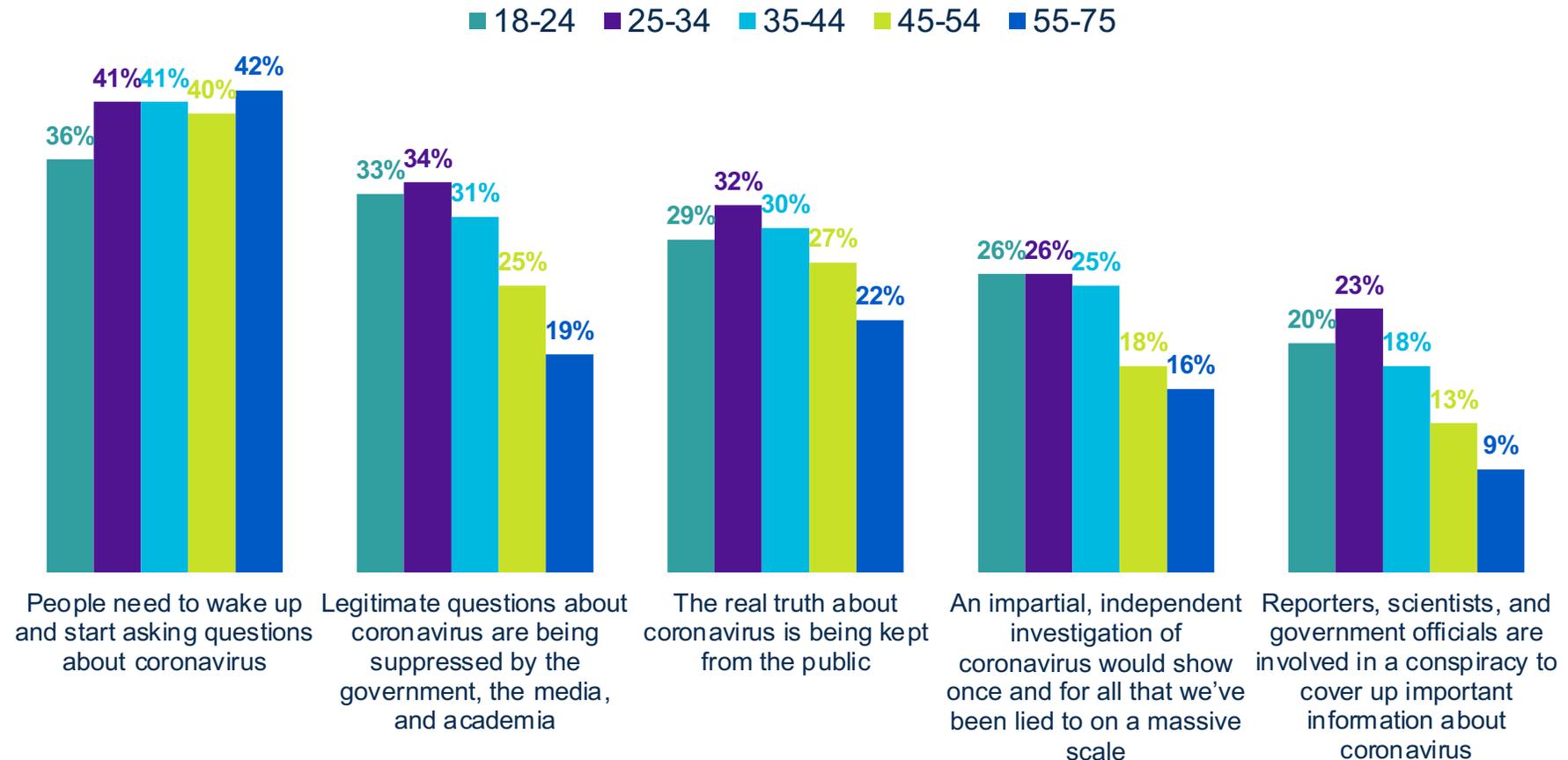
% who have conspiracy suspicions about coronavirus



Base: 4,432 UK adults from white ethnic groups and 384 from non-white ethnic groups, aged 18-75, interviewed online between 21 Nov-22 Dec 2020.

People aged 25 to 34 are most likely to hold these conspiracy suspicions, with older people least likely to do so – except when it comes to the suspicion that people need to wake up and start asking questions about coronavirus, which is believed by 42% of those aged 55-75 – the highest of any age group. This compares with 41% of 25-34-year-olds and 36% of 18-24-year-olds.

% who have conspiracy suspicions about coronavirus, by age



Base: 4,860 UK adults aged 18-75, interviewed online between 21 Nov-22 Dec 2020.

Conspiracy theories about coronavirus

Belief in more concrete conspiracy theories about the pandemic is also relatively common – for example, one in five believe the authorities want us to think that coronavirus is much more dangerous than it really is.

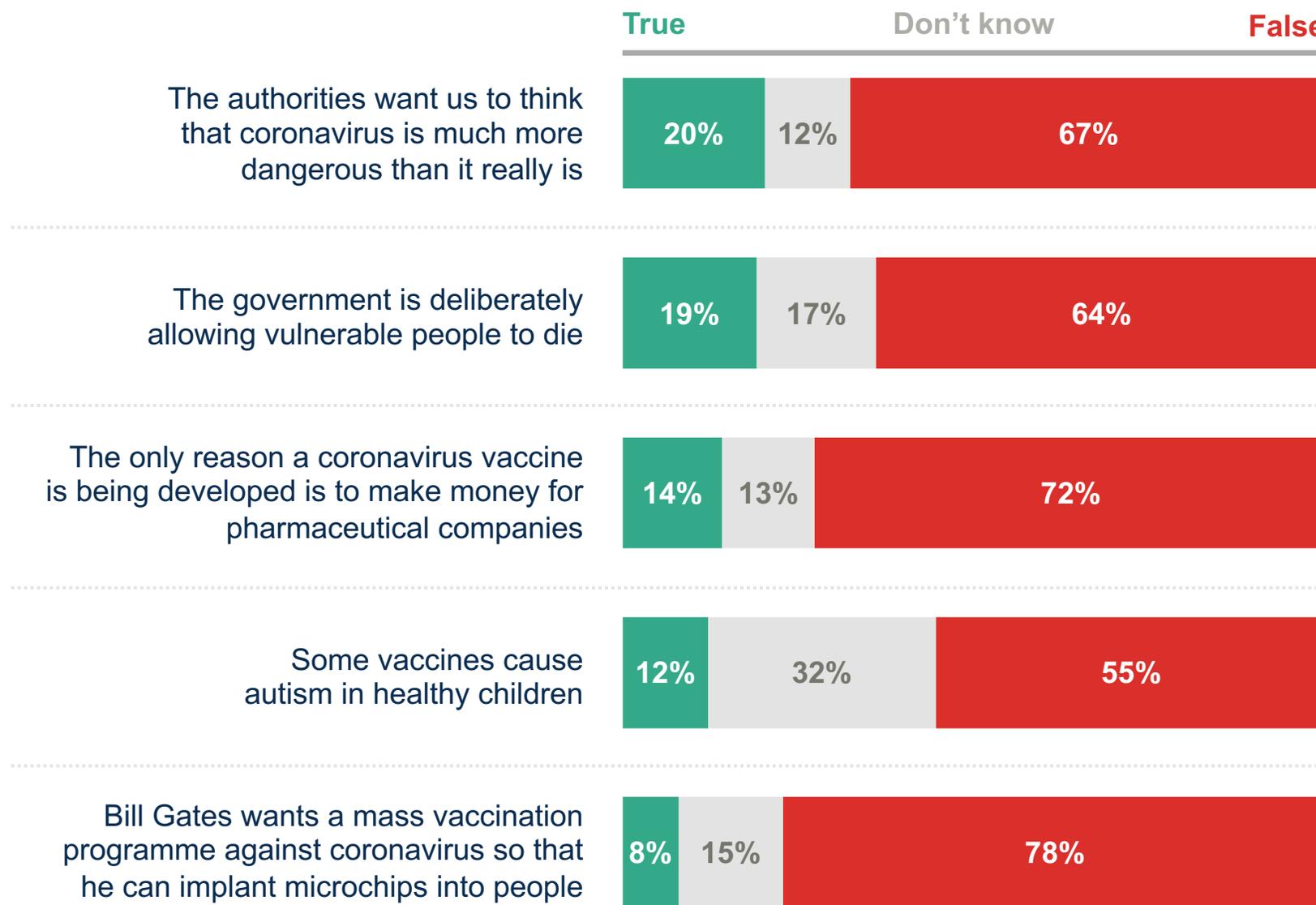
Again, there is a divide in views between people from white ethnic groups and other ethnic groups, with the latter more likely to believe various conspiracy theories – even particularly extreme ones – are true.

And there have been notable changes in belief in some conspiracies over the course of the pandemic, such as theory that the death toll from coronavirus is being intentionally exaggerated by the authorities.

One in five people believe the authorities want us to think that coronavirus is much more dangerous than it really is (20%) and that the government is deliberately allowing vulnerable people to die (19%).

Smaller proportions think other conspiracy theories are true, such as that some vaccines cause autism in healthy children (12%) – although there is a relatively high level of uncertainty about this claim, with a third (32%) of the UK saying they don't know whether it's true or false.

Are the following statements true or false?

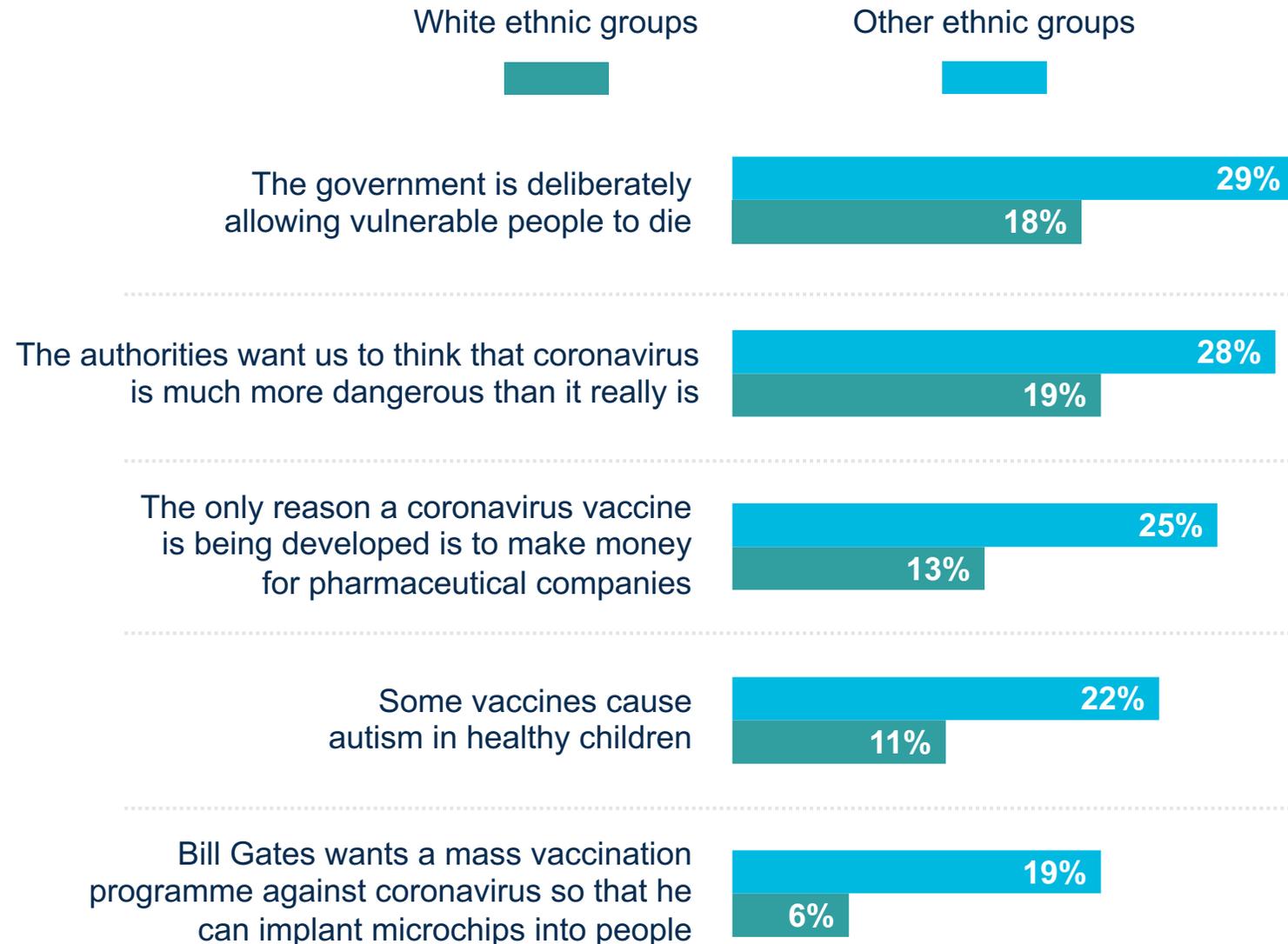


Base: 4,860 UK adults aged 18-75, interviewed online between 21 Nov-22 Dec 2020.

Again, people from ethnic minorities are more likely to believe conspiracy theories related to the pandemic.

For example, they are three times as likely as those from white ethnic groups to think that Bill Gates wants to implant microchips into people through a coronavirus vaccination programme (19% vs 6%), and twice as likely to believe some vaccines cause autism in healthy children (22% vs 11%).

% who believe conspiracy theories about coronavirus

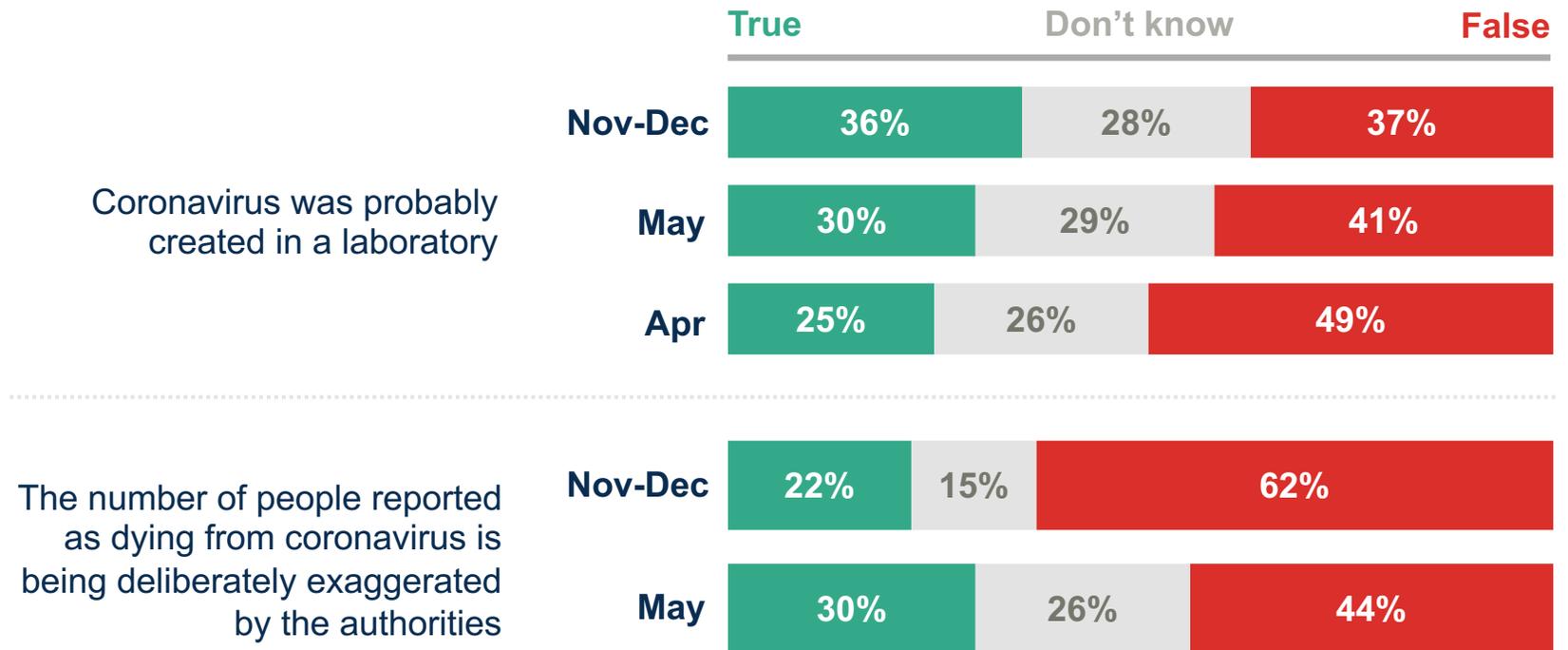


Levels of belief in two conspiracy theories have changed over the course of the coronavirus crisis.

36% of people now believe the virus was created in a lab, up from 25% back in April.

And far more people now say they don't believe the death toll from coronavirus is being intentionally exaggerated by the authorities. 44% said they didn't believe this in May, compared with 62% who say the same now.

Are the following statements true or false?



Base: 4,860 UK adults aged 18-75, interviewed online between 21 Nov-22 Dec 2020.
 2,254 UK residents aged 16-75, interviewed online between 20-22 May 2020.
 2,250 UK residents aged 16-75, interviewed online between 1-3 April 2020.

The link with where people get their information from

People who say they get a great deal or fair amount of their information on coronavirus from certain online sources, including social media platforms, are significantly more likely to have conspiracy suspicions about the pandemic and think various conspiracy theories are true.

Those whose knowledge about the crisis comes from such sources are also much more likely to say they'd be persuaded to turn down a coronavirus vaccine because of potential concerns about it.

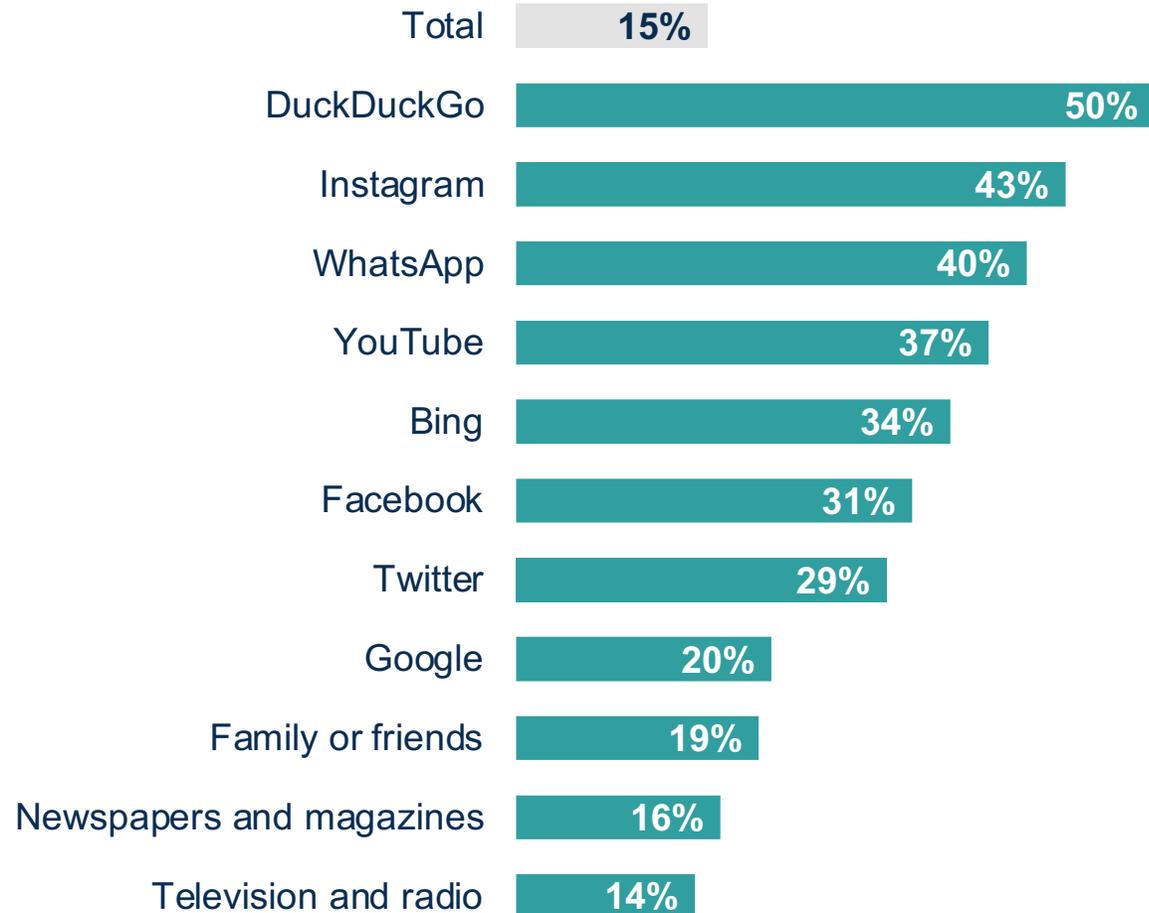
And this wariness about a vaccine doesn't seem to be down to the younger age profile of social media users, as those who are the same age but get their information from traditional media sources are more likely to say they'll get vaccinated.

People who get a great deal or fair amount of their information on the pandemic from certain online sources are far more likely to have conspiracy suspicions, such as the suspicion that there is a coordinated cover-up of important information about coronavirus.

While 15% of the public overall hold this view, it is held by much greater proportions of those who say their knowledge comes from DuckDuckGo (50%), Instagram (43%), WhatsApp (40%), YouTube (37%), Bing (34%), Facebook (31%) and Twitter (29%).

% who agree that reporters, scientists, and government officials are involved in a conspiracy to cover up important information about coronavirus

Get a great deal or fair amount of information on coronavirus from...

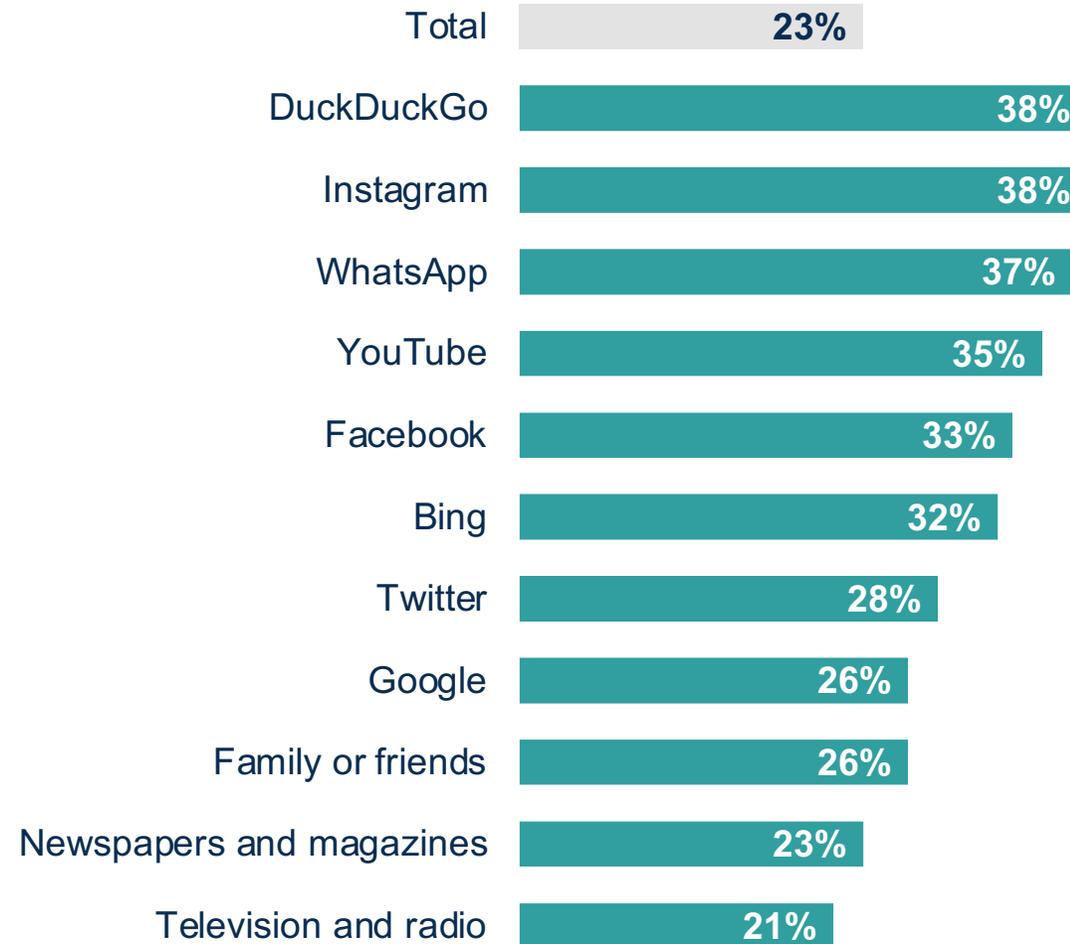


23% of the public overall think the government is deliberately letting the vulnerable die from coronavirus, but belief in this conspiracy theory rises even higher among those who get a lot of their information from, for example, DuckDuckGo (38%), Instagram (38%) and WhatsApp (37%).

Compared with people who mostly consult these online sources, levels of belief among those who rely more on traditional media is notably lower.

% who believe the government is deliberately allowing vulnerable people to die

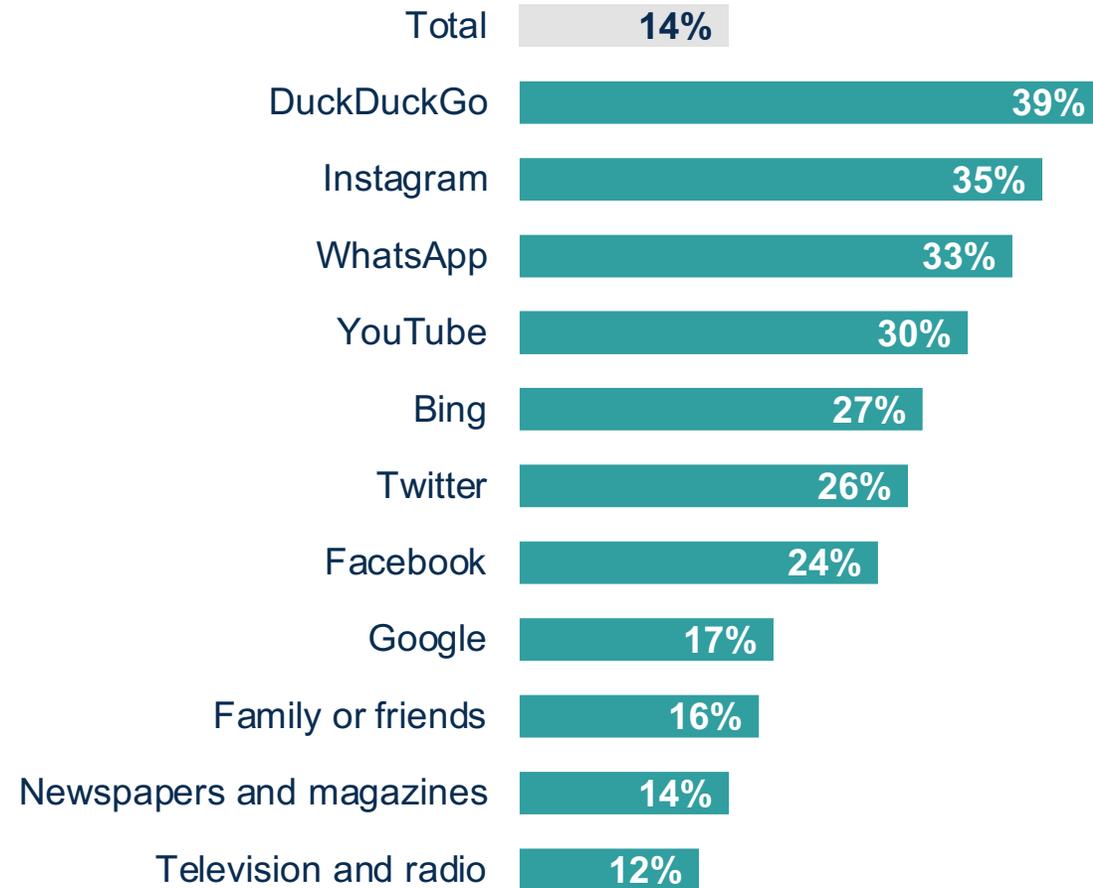
Get a great deal or fair amount of information on coronavirus from...



Those who get most of their information on the pandemic online, from sources such as DuckDuckGo (39%), Instagram (35%), WhatsApp (33%), YouTube (30%) and others are much more likely than the population overall (14%) to believe the real reason a coronavirus vaccine is being developed is to enrich the pharmaceutical industry.

% who believe the only reason a coronavirus vaccine is being developed is to make money for pharmaceutical companies

Get a great deal or fair amount of information on coronavirus from...



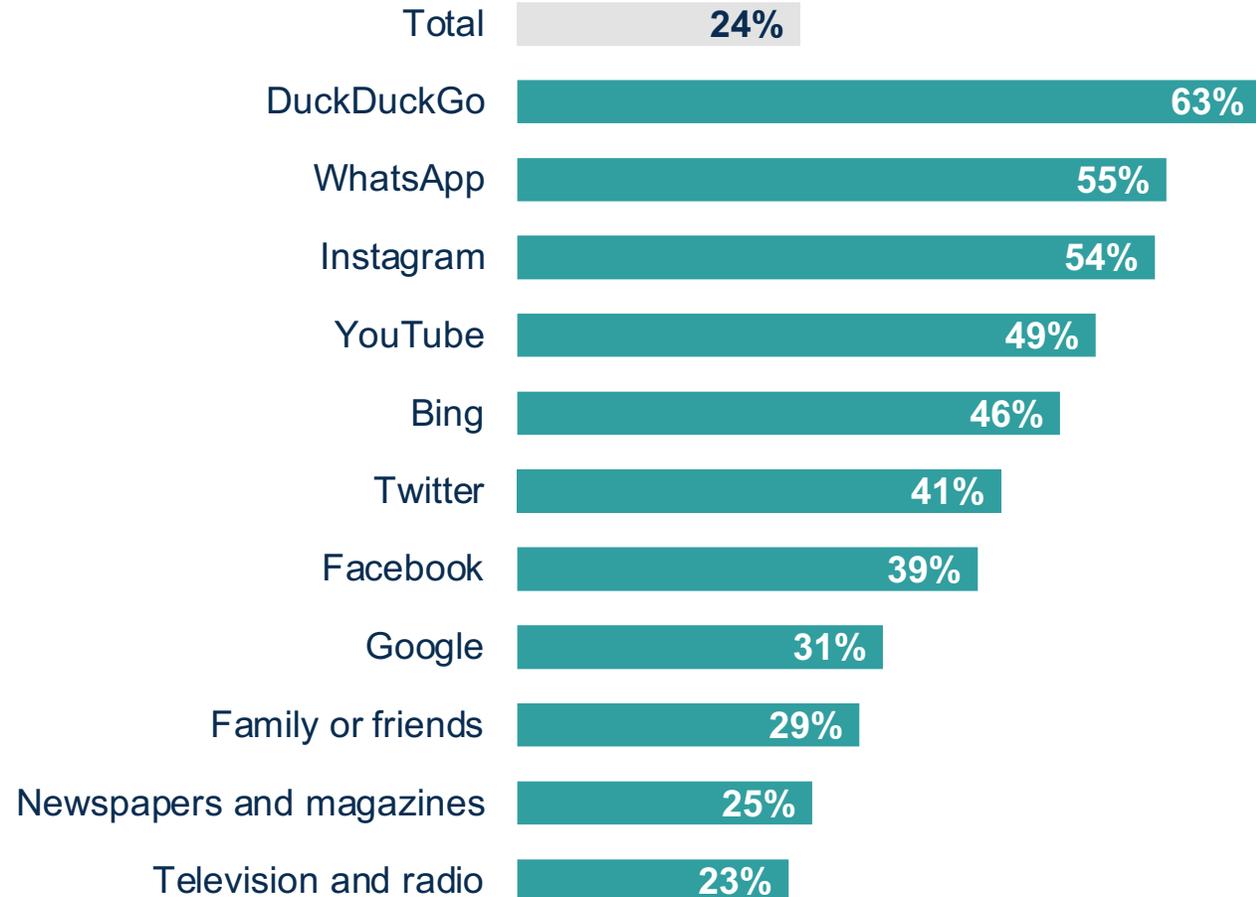
Base: 4,860 UK adults aged 18-75, interviewed online between 21 Nov-22 Dec 2020.

Relying on various online sources and social media platforms is also associated with far greater levels of potential concern about getting vaccinated against coronavirus.

For example, those who get a lot of their information from DuckDuckGo (63%), WhatsApp (55%), Instagram (54%) and YouTube (49%) are more than twice as likely as both the population overall and those who rely on traditional media sources to say that they would probably be put off getting a vaccine if there were concerns that it might overload their immune system.

% who say that **concerns about overloading their immune system** are likely to persuade them not to get a coronavirus vaccine

Get a great deal or fair amount of information on coronavirus from...

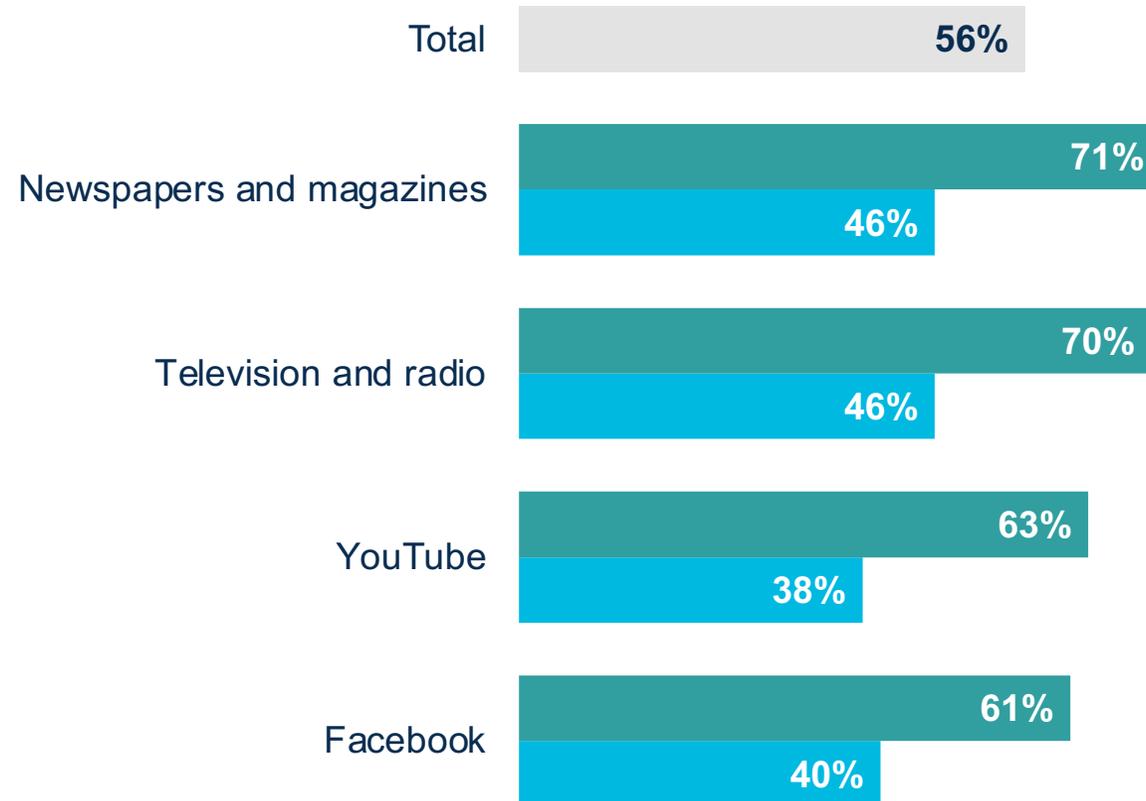


Whichever age group we look at, people who get their information about coronavirus from social media are less likely to get vaccinated than people of the same age who get their information about the virus from traditional media sources.

% who say they're **certain or very likely** to get a coronavirus vaccine

■ Over 50 years of age ■ Under 50 years of age

Get a great deal or fair amount of information on coronavirus from...

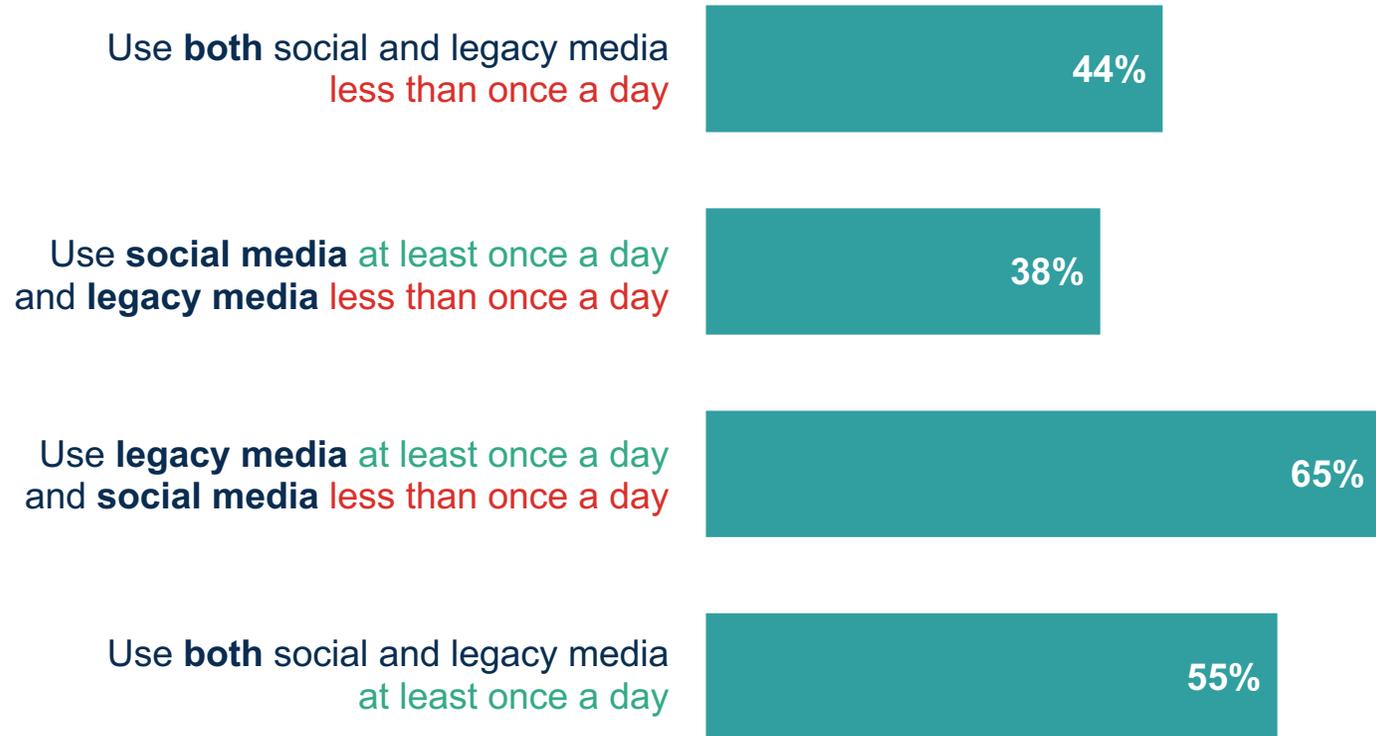


Consuming legacy media (such as newspapers, TV and radio) more often than social media is associated with a greater likelihood of getting vaccinated against coronavirus.

65% of those who use legacy media more frequently than social media say they're certain or very likely to get a vaccine, compared with 38% of those with the opposite media consumption habits.

Those who prioritise both types of media to the same extent – either using them less than once a day (44%) or at least once a day (55%) – fall in the middle of the spectrum.

% who say they are **certain or very likely** to get a coronavirus vaccine



How vaccine likelihood has changed and what people's concerns are

There are possible signs that the public are becoming more certain about whether or not they'll get a coronavirus vaccine, and a longitudinal sample in this study shows some people changed their mind over the course of last year.

Younger people and those from ethnic minorities are much less likely to say they'd like to be vaccinated immediately and much more likely to say they could be deterred from getting the vaccine if concerns about it arose, such as around potential side effects, its effectiveness and speed of development.

There are some indications that people's positions have hardened on whether or not they will get vaccinated against coronavirus.

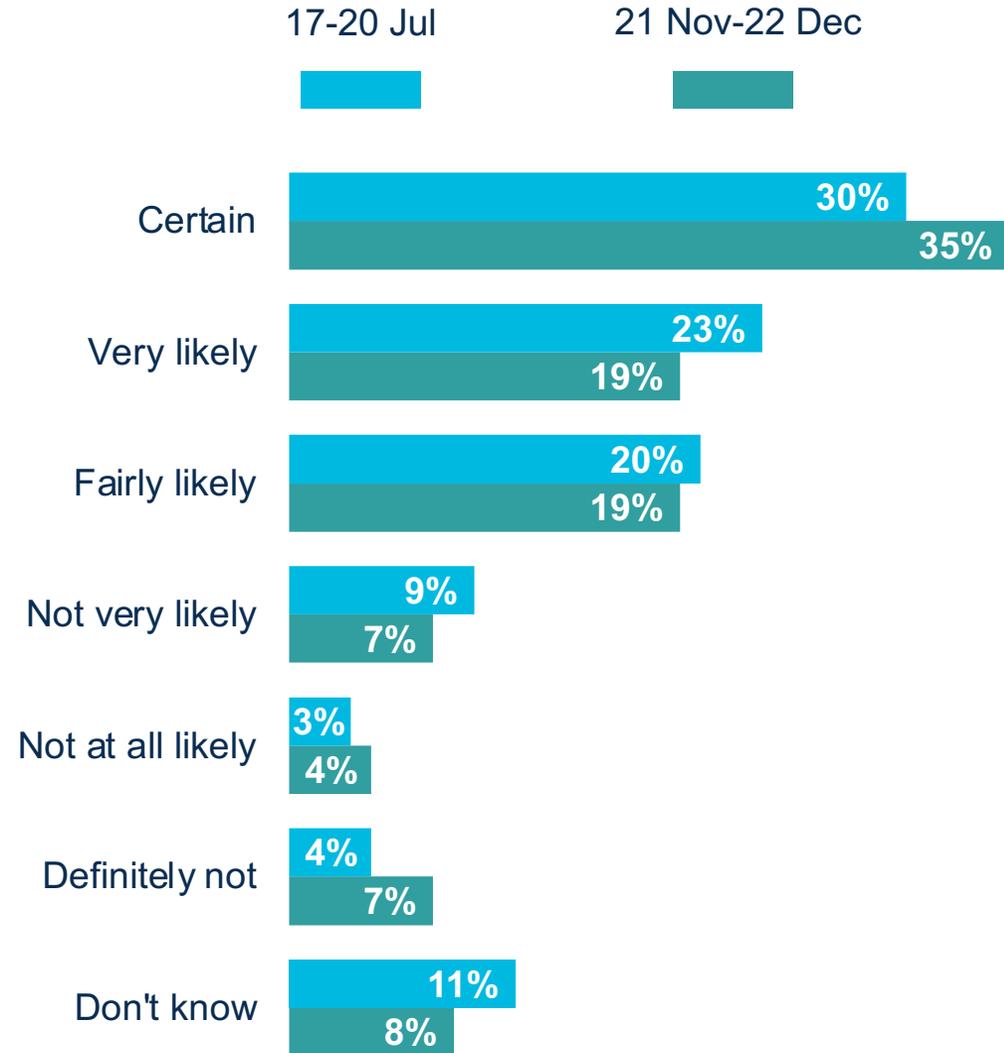
The proportion who say they are certain to do so rose from 30% in July to 35% in Nov/Dec, while those who say they definitely won't get vaccinated also rose – albeit by less – from 4% to 7%.

Overall, a majority of people (54%) say they're certain or very likely to get a coronavirus vaccine, compared with nearly one in five (18%) who say they're unlikely to or definitely won't.

20% say they're fairly likely to.



If a vaccine for coronavirus becomes available, how likely or unlikely would you personally be to get the vaccine?



Base: 4,860 UK adults aged 18-75, interviewed online between 21 Nov-22 Dec 2020, and 2,237 UK residents aged 16-75, interviewed 17-20 July.

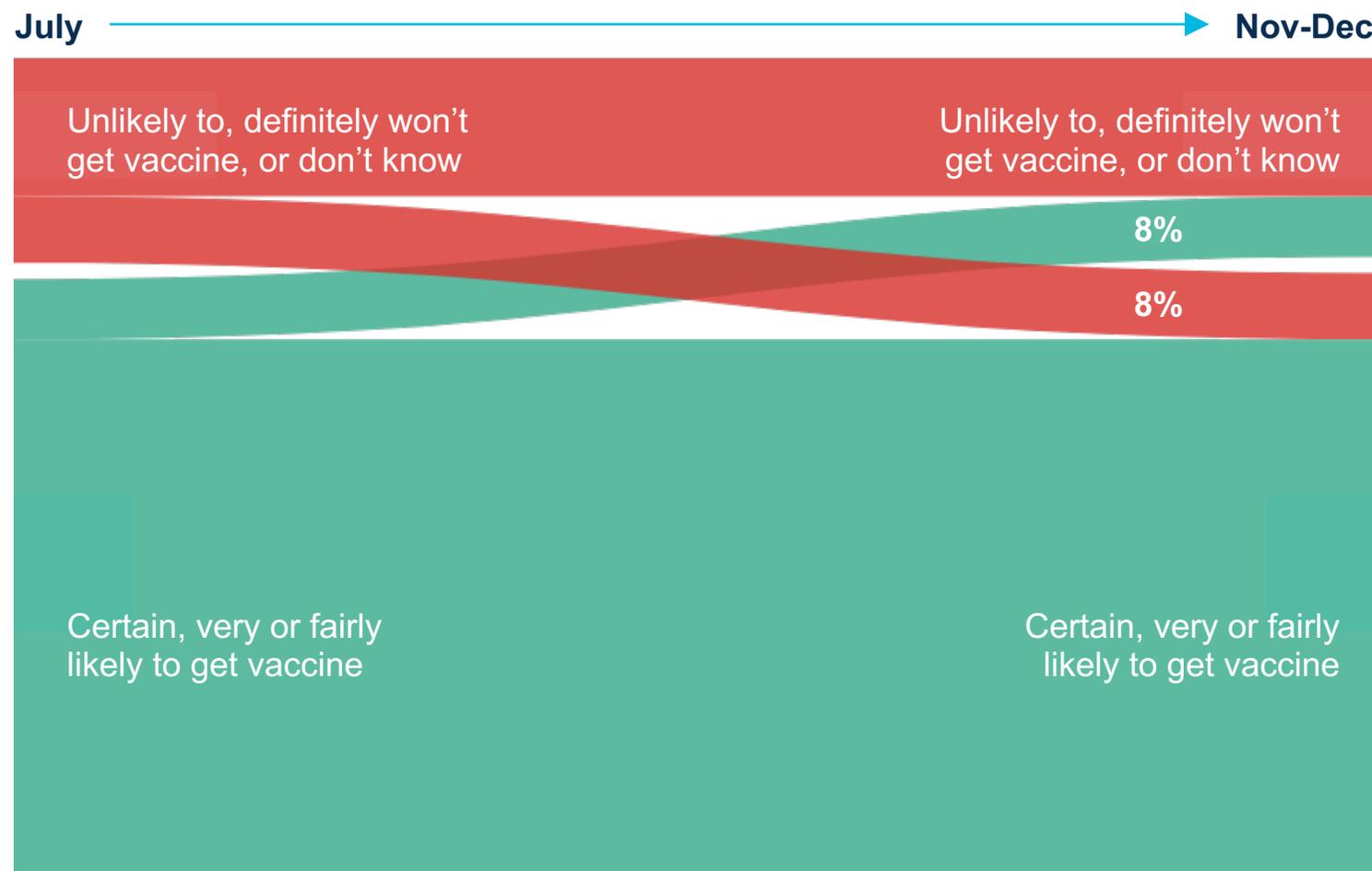
Looking at a longitudinal sample that tracks the same people over time, it is clear that over the course of 2020 some changed their minds on whether they will get a coronavirus vaccine.

8% of respondents switched to being certain, very or fairly likely to get vaccinated – where previously they said they didn't know whether they would, or were unlikely or definite not to.

Another 8% went in the opposite direction.

Those under 50 years of age were slightly more likely than those over 50 to have changed their minds.

How some people have changed their minds about getting a coronavirus vaccine



3 in 10 people (29%) say they'd like to be vaccinated against Covid-19 immediately after a vaccine becomes available – the most commonly chosen answer among the public.

People from ethnic minorities (15%) are half as likely as those from white ethnic groups (31%) to say they'd want the vaccine straight away.

Younger people are also much less likely than older people to want to be vaccinated immediately: 18% of 16-21-year-olds would like to be immunised as soon as possible, compared with 41% of those aged 55 to 75.

4 in 10 (42%) Britons would prefer to wait at least a month before receiving the vaccine.

How soon, if at all, after the coronavirus vaccine becomes available to all, would you like to become vaccinated?



% who say they would like to be vaccinated immediately after a vaccine is available, by age and ethnicity

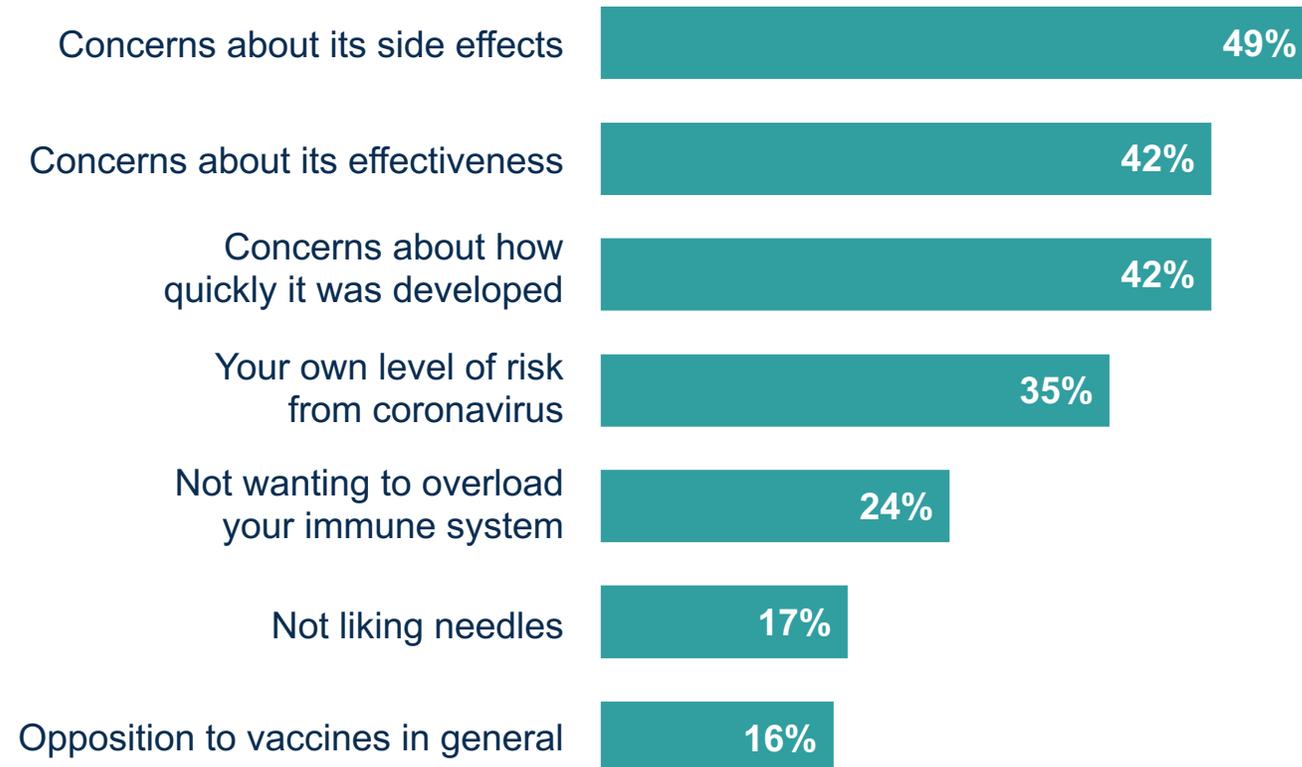


Concerns about side effects (49%), effectiveness (42%) and the speed of development (42%) are the top potential reasons that would make the public not take a coronavirus vaccine.

A dislike of needles (17%) and opposition to vaccines in general (16%) are cited by far fewer people.

How likely or unlikely is it that each of the following would persuade you not to take the coronavirus vaccine if one was made available?

% who say very or fairly likely



People from ethnic minorities are much more likely than those from white ethnic groups to say that various concerns about a coronavirus vaccine would probably persuade them not to take it.

For example, 22% of white ethnic groups say not wanting to overload their immune system could put them off getting vaccinated, compared with 41% of people from other ethnic groups who say the same.

The latter are also twice as likely to say opposition to vaccines in general (29% vs 14%) and not liking needles (30% vs 16%) could discourage them.

How likely or unlikely is it that each of the following would persuade you not to take the coronavirus vaccine if one was made available?

% who say very or fairly likely, by ethnicity



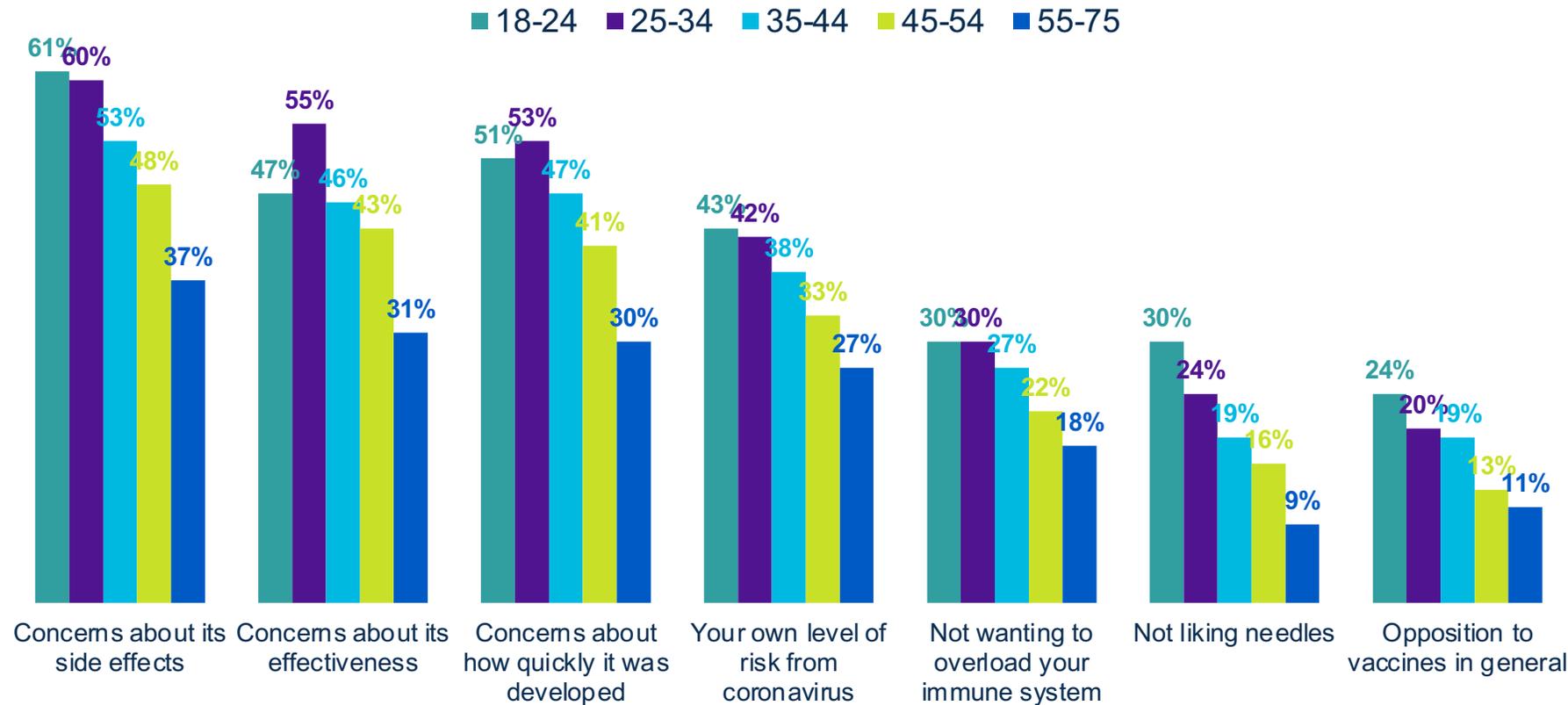
Older people are least likely to say they'd be put off getting a coronavirus vaccine because of potential concerns.

37% of 55-75-year-olds would be deterred if there were concerns about the vaccine having side effects, compared with 60% of 25-34-year-olds and 61% of those aged 18 to 24.

Overall, younger people are most likely to say they could be persuaded not to get a vaccine if concerns about it arose.

How likely or unlikely is it that each of the following would persuade you not to take the coronavirus vaccine if one was made available?

% who say very or fairly likely, by age



Base: 4,860 UK adults aged 18-75, interviewed online between 21 Nov-22 Dec 2020.

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