COVID-19 Vaccine Acceptance Rate and Its Factors among Healthcare Students: A Systematic Review with Meta-Analysis

Muhammad Mainuddin Patwary 1,2,*, Mondira Bardhan 1,2, Md. Zahidul Haque 1,2, Rabeya Sultana 2, Md Ashraful Alam 3,4* and Matthew H. E. M. Browning 5

1 Environment and Sustainability Research Initiative, Khulna 9208, Bangladesh; mondirabardhan.22@gmail.com (M.B.); rtr.zahid@gmail.com (M.Z.H.)
2 Environmental Science Discipline, Life Science School, Khulna University, Khulna 9208, Bangladesh; rabeya.sultana@ku.ac.bd
3 Department of Global Health Policy, Graduate School of Medicine, The University of Tokyo, Tokyo 113-0033, Japan; aalam@m.u-tokyo.ac.jp
4 Tokyo Foundation for Policy Research, Tokyo 106-6234, Japan
5 Department of Parks, Recreation and Tourism Management, Clemson University, Clemson, SC 29634, USA; mhb2@clemson.edu

* Correspondence: raju.es111012@gmail.com

Abstract: Healthcare students are clinicians-in-training likely to come into contact with COVID-19 as much as other frontline healthcare professionals. It is therefore necessary to prioritize vaccinations for this group. We conducted a global systematic assessment of COVID-19 vaccine acceptance rates and related factors among healthcare students using the PubMed, Scopus, and Web of Science databases and keyword searches in March of 2022. We found 1779 articles with relevant information and 31 articles that matched our inclusion criteria. We performed a random-effects meta-analysis and quality assessment using the eight-item Joanna Briggs Institute Critical Appraisal test for cross-sectional studies. A total of 30,272 individuals from 16 countries were studied. Most of the studies were carried out in the U.S. (n = 6), China (n = 5), Poland (n = 5), India (n = 2), Italy (n = 2), and Israel (n = 2). The prevalence of the COVID-19 vaccine acceptance rate was 68.8% (95% confidence interval [CI]: 60.8–76.3, \(I^2 = 100\%\)), and the prevalence of the vaccine hesitancy rate was 25.8% (95% CI: 18.5–33.8, \(I^2 = 99\%\)). In country-specific analyses, Romania showed the highest acceptance rate (88.0%, 95% CI: 44.5–100%), while Iraq showed the lowest acceptance rate (66.2%, 95% CI: 35.5–90.8%). In time-trend analyses, we found that acceptance rates among healthcare students decreased over time. Students concerned about potentially serious side effects of the vaccine were less willing to accept the vaccine. National and international interventions should be adopted to reduce COVID-19 vaccination hesitancy rates among these important frontline workers.

Keywords: vaccine hesitancy; vaccine acceptance; COVID-19; frontline workers; healthcare students; meta-analysis; SARS-CoV-2; vaccine

1. Introduction

The ongoing COVID-19 pandemic has turned into a global challenge due to its dramatically contagious nature. The virus has led to more than 4.6 million deaths globally between February of 2020 and August of 2021 [1]. Vaccinations are one of the most cost-effective and long-lasting measures in helping to control such a public health disaster [2]. Vaccination rates directly impact herd immunity. Studies reported that when a population’s acquired immunity reaches 67%, the prevalence of COVID-19 infections will continue to decline [3]. Multiple biological and chemotherapeutic measures (i.e., plasma therapy, hydroxychloroquine, remdesivir, and tocilizumab) have been used to treat COVID-19 patients, but their curative effects have generally not been recommended or proven for patient treatment [4].
Many countries have encountered ongoing surges in COVID-19 cases due to relaxed precautionary measures like lockdowns, social distancing, hand washing, and personal hygiene practices [5]. Vaccinations remain the most important tool in combating the pandemic. Scientific authorities have undertaken over 300 vaccine invention projects, among which approximately 40 are in the clinical trial stage and a few are available to the general population [6]. Vaccine development was accelerated when two of these vaccines were granted Emergency Use Authorization (EUA) in December of 2020—a process that generally takes several years or more [7]. As of July of 2021, about three billion doses of COVID-19 vaccines have been administered worldwide. More than 11.48 billion doses of vaccines have been approved in at least one country. Clinical trials have shown that some of these have significant promise for real-world use, while others are customized to the unique needs of certain groups (i.e., older adults). Vaccination effectiveness generally varies between 50% and 77%. There is evidence that many vaccines may help minimize the likelihood of severe illness and asymptomatic disease, thus limiting the spread of SARS-CoV-2 [8,9].

Any vaccination program’s success depends upon people’s willingness to be vaccinated, the demand for vaccines, and positive attitudes toward vaccines [10,11]. Therefore, vaccine hesitancy limits the success of a vaccination program’s success; such hesitancy is defined by the indecision, reluctance, or refusal of vaccination [12,13]. The World Health Organization (WHO) has stated that vaccine hesitancy is a serious threat to public health [14]. For example, the 2018 measles outbreak in New York City revealed that vaccine hesitancy resulted in continuous transmission [15]. Vaccine hesitancy has been linked to numerous factors, such as distrust in the government, fear of side effects, and religious convictions [16].

During the COVID-19 pandemic, there has been much discussion about vaccines, especially among healthcare workers (HCWs) and students [17,18]. Healthcare students (HCSs) in medical, dental, nursing, and related programs are future clinical caregivers and important populations who need to be vaccinated against COVID-19. Several governments have chosen to incorporate medical students as volunteers who assist with coronavirus treatment while finishing their residency training [19]. HCSs are likely to come into contact with COVID-19-infected patients during training sessions and clinical practice [20,21]. To avoid further infection and increase vaccine acceptance rates, medical students must be taught about the benefits of vaccines as part of their training. Furthermore, their families and friends look to them as competent and trustworthy resources of information, which means their opinions and views have an influence on the general public’s vaccine acceptance levels [22].

Numerous studies have investigated vaccine acceptance or hesitancy rates among HCSs. Some of these studies showed surprisingly high rates of vaccine hesitancy [17]. For example, one study in the U.S. found that nearly one-quarter of medical students were reluctant to be vaccinated, even after an approved COVID-19 vaccine was available [18]. Another study among nursing students in Greece, Albania, Cyprus, Spain, Italy, the Czech Republic, and Kosovo found that less than one-half were willing to be vaccinated [23]. In contrast, nearly 90% of medical students in India [24] and nursing students in China [2] were willing to get vaccinated.

We conducted a rapid systematic review with meta-analysis on HCSs’ perception of being vaccinated in response to this growing body of literature on vaccination acceptance and hesitancy among HCSs and the seemingly disparate results. Comparable systematic reviews and meta-analyses have been conducted among general populations [10,25,26] and healthcare workers [27,28], but not HCSs. Our aim was to assess the acceptance and hesitancy of COVID-19 vaccination rates among HCSs globally and identify the factors predicting vaccine acceptance. We expected the findings to help understand the challenges associated with vaccine hesitancy among HCSs, as well as inform strategies for overcoming these challenges.
2. Materials and Methods

We followed the Cochrane Rapid Review guidelines to conduct a rapid systematic review with a streamlined but robust approach. The criteria were searches in English and peer-reviewed studies. Similar approaches have been used to provide time-sensitive information that informs decision-making surrounding COVID-19 immunization programs [29].

2.1. Search Strategy

We systematically searched three databases (PubMed, Web of Science, and Scopus) using the PRISMA checklist (http://www.prisma-statement.org/) on 5 March 2022. We utilized the following Medical Subject Heading (MeSH) terms as well as text words (tw) for COVID-19: “COVID-19”, “SARS-CoV-2”, “coronavirus”, “novel coronavirus”, “nCoV”, “2019-ncov”, “SARS-2”, and “severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2”. For vaccines, we used: “vaccines”, “vaccination”, “COVID-19 vaccines”, “vaccina”, “vaccine uptake”, and “SARS-CoV-2 vaccine”. For acceptance/hesitancy, we used: “vaccine hesitancy”, “vaccine acceptance”, “vaccine confidence”, “vaccine safety”, “vaccination attitudes”, “vaccine rejection”, and “vaccine willingness”. We did not specify the population terms to avoid excluding potentially important and relevant articles.

Additional articles were identified using the references and citation lists of articles and reviews found in the keyword searches via forward and backward citation tracking in Google Scholar.

2.2. Study Selection

All records were imported to ‘Rayyan’ (https://www.rayyan.ai/; accessed on 5 March 2022). This is a tool for intelligent systematic reviews. Duplicates were removed using this software. Irrelevant records were excluded through title and abstract screening. Next, the full texts of the remaining articles were screened (Figure 1). Discrepancies were resolved by discussion among the three reviewers (MMP, MB, and MZH) and, if required, consultation with other co-authors for reaching a consensus.

Figure 1. PRISMA flow diagram of the study selection process.

We had six inclusion criteria for the articles. These included: (1) survey studies among HCSs; (2) descriptive and observational studies among HCSs with cross-sectional, experimental, or longitudinal designs; (3) studies focused on evaluating COVID-19 vaccine
Six exclusion criteria were included. These were: (1) articles not aiming to evaluate COVID-19 vaccine acceptance or hesitancy; (2) study populations other than HCSs; (3) publication types other than peer-reviewed journal articles, such as literature reviews, systematic reviews, unpublished data, books, conference papers, editorials, commentaries, letters to the editor, and case reports; (4) studies with non-human subjects; (5) studies without available full-texts; and (6) studies other than in English.

2.3. Data Extraction

Data extraction was performed independently by three co-authors. The extracted data included: author-name; publication year; study country; study design; survey method and period; target population; sampling method; sample size; measurement scale of vaccine acceptance; statistical analysis; acceptance rate; hesitancy rate; factors associated with vaccine acceptance, hesitance, or refusal; and summary of results. These data are summarized in Table 1. After independent data extraction, any differences were resolved by consensus among the same three co-authors.

2.4. Assessment of Study Quality

Regarding quality assessment and evaluating the risk of bias, we adopted the Joanna Briggs Institute critical appraisal tools for analytical cross-sectional studies (Table S1) [30]. This allowed us to determine whether certain articles should be included or excluded, or if additional information was required. We used a checklist with eight questions on the study’s methods and applicable data analysis for this purpose. The total score for each study was assessed by aggregating the individual scores and categorizing them into a high- or low-quality group following previous studies [31,32].

2.5. Data Analysis

Acceptance and hesitancy rates were pooled using random-effects models. The Higgin’s and Thompson’s $I^2$ statistics determined the heterogeneity [33,34]. Funnel plots and the Egger’s tests identified potential publication bias. We considered the survey year and country for subgroup analysis and conducted meta-regression analyses for four predictors: sex, residence, history of prior vaccinations, and concern about serious side effects. All analyses were performed using the ‘meta’ statistical packages in R software (version 4.2.1).

3. Results

3.1. Search Results

A total of 2781 articles were identified in preliminary searches across three databases including PubMed, Web of Science, and Scopus. Of these, 1002 articles were duplicates. After assessing their eligibility based on the title and abstract, 39 articles were eligible for full-text screening. Ultimately, 31 articles were included in the analyses (Figure 1).

3.2. Characteristics of Included Studies

The characteristics of the included articles are summarized in Table 1. Most used a cross-sectional design and collected data via telephone or online surveys. The majority also relied heavily on snowball sampling (i.e., via social media or email) and convenience sampling for recruitment. Studies were mostly conducted between March of 2020 and March of 2021.

The total number of healthcare students included in the studies was 30,272. Sample sizes ranged from 104 in Israel [35] to 6639 in one study across 22 countries [36]. Approximately 19,425 students (64% of total sample) were female. Most of the studies were conducted in the U.S. ($n = 6$), China ($n = 5$), Poland ($n = 2$), India ($n = 2$), Italy ($n = 2$), and Israel ($n = 2$). The largest share of HCSs were medical students, followed by nursing and dental students.
Table 1. Characteristics of included studies.

| SL  | Author(s)                        | Study Country  | Type of Healthcare Students | Study Design | Survey Method | Survey Period                      | Sampling Method | Sample Size, N | Gender, Female (%) | Vaccine Acceptance Rate (%) |
|-----|----------------------------------|----------------|-----------------------------|--------------|---------------|-----------------------------------|----------------|-----------------|---------------------|-----------------------------|
| 1   | Al Janabi et al. [37]            | USA            | Osteopathic medical         | Cross-sectional | Online       | October 2020                       | NR             | 197             | 57.9               | 45                          |
| 2   | Bălan et al. [38]                | Romania         | General Medicine, Dentistry, Pharmacy and Nursing and Midwifery | Cross-sectional | Online       | 12 January until 3 March 2021      | NR             | 1581            | 74.5               | 88                          |
| 3   | Belingheri et al. [39]           | Italy           | Nursing                     | Cross-sectional | Online       | 21–27 December 2020                | NR             | 422             | 82.9               | 80.9                        |
| 4   | Bolatov et al. [40]              | Kazakhstan      | Medical                     | Cross-sectional | Online       | March 2021                         | NR             | 888             | 76.5               | 22.4                        |
| 5   | De Sousa Chaves et al. [41]      | Brazil          | Medical                     | Cross-sectional | Online       | 18 December 2020 to 8 January 2021 | Snowball sampling | 250             | 58.5               | 84                          |
| 6   | Gao et al. [42]                  | China           | Medical                     | Cross-sectional | Online       | February–March 2021                | Convenience sampling | 612             | 63.2               | NR                          |
| 7   | Gotlib et al. [43]               | Poland          | Nursing undergraduate students | Cross-sectional | Online       | March–April 2021                   | NR             | 793             | 90.8               | 38                          |
| 8   | Grochowska et al. [44]           | Poland          | Medical                     | Cross-sectional | Online/Off line | 4 September–5 November 2020       | NR             | 419             | n = 331             | 70.7                        |
| 9   | Jain et al. [45]                 | India           | Medical                     | Cross-sectional | Online       | 2 February–7 March 2021            | Respondent-driven sampling strategy | 1068            | 48.6               | 89.4                        |
| 10  | Jiang et al. [2]                 | China           | Nursing                     | Cross-sectional | Online       | February–April 2021                | Convenience     | 1488            | 84.27              | 1256                        |
| 11  | Kanyike et al. [4]               | Uganda          | Medical                     | Cross-sectional | Online       | 15–21 March 2021                   | Convenience     | 600             | 37.2               | 224                         |
| 12  | Katz et al. [35]                 | Israel          | Medical                     | Cross-sectional | Online       | December 2020                      | NR             | 104             | 61.5               | 91.35                       |
| 13  | Kelekar et al. [17]              | USA             | Medical                     | Cross-sectional | Online       | November–December 2019             | NR             | 167             | 91.35              | 126                         |
| 14  | L. Jain et al. [46]              | India           | Healthcare student          | Cross-sectional | Online       | November 2020–January 2021         | Snowball sampling | 655             | 61.98              | 63.82                       |
| 15  | Li et al. [47]                   | China           | Medical                     | Cross-sectional | Online       | 15 March–30 March 2021             | NR             | 2196            | 81.7               | 1291                        |
| 16  | Lindner-Pawłowicz et al. [48]    | Poland          | Medical                     | Cross-sectional | Online       | 8–31 December 2020                 | NR             | 350             | NR                 | 76.9                        |
Table 1. Cont.

| SL | Author          | Study Country | Type of Healthcare Students | Study Design                  | Survey Method | Survey Period                          | Sampling Method | Sample Size, N | Gender, Female (%) | Vaccine Acceptance Rate (%) |
|----|----------------|---------------|------------------------------|-------------------------------|---------------|----------------------------------------|-----------------|----------------|-------------------|--------------------------|
| 17 | Lucia et al. [18] | USA           | Medical Students             | Cross-sectional               | Online        | NR                                     | NR              | 167             | 57                | 126                      |
| 18 | Lo Moro et al. [49] | Italy         | Medical                      | Cross-sectional               | Online        | 20 November 2020–2 February 2021       | NR              | 838             | 63.5              | 93.3                    |
| 19 | Mahdi [50]       | Iraq          | Medical                      | Cross-sectional               | Online        | 2021                                    | NR              | 810             | 60.2              | 33.83                   |
| 20 | Manning et al. [21] | USA           | Nursing                      | Cross-sectional               | Online        | 10 August–14 September 2020            | NR              | 1029            | 87.7              | 466                     |
| 21 | Mascarenhas et al. [20] | USA       | Dental                       | Cross-sectional               | Online        | 2020                                    | NR              | 248             | 58                | 136                     |
| 22 | Mayan et al. [51] | USA           | Medical                      | Cross-sectional               | Online        | 9 February–15 March 2021               | NR              | 1899            | 64.3              | 93.31                   |
| 23 | Mose et al. [52]  | Ethiopia       | Medical and health science   | Cross-sectional               | NR            | 1–30 March 2021                         | Simple random sampling | 420             | 41.7              | 58.8                    |
| 24 | Petravic et al. [53] | Slovenia     | Medical & Healthcare students | Cross-sectional               | Online        | December 2020                           | NR              | 624             | 79.49             | 51                      |
| 25 | Riad et al. [36]  | 22 countries  | Dental                       | Cross-sectional               | Online        | 6–28 February 2021                      | NR              | 6639            | 70.5              | 63.6                    |
| 26 | Rosental and Shmuelp [54] | Israel     | Medical and nursing          | Cross-sectional               | Online        | 27 August–28 September 2020            | NR              | 628             | 66.6              | 282 Medical, 234 Nursing |
| 27 | Saied et al. [6]  | Egypt         | Medical                      | Cross-sectional               | Online        | 8–15 January 2021                       | Convenience sampling | 2133            | NR                | 34.9                    |
| 28 | Smuyl et al. [55] | Poland        | Medical                      | Cross-sectional               | Online        | 22–25 December 2020                     | NR              | 687             | 64.77             | 632                     |
| 29 | Talarek et al. [56] | Poland        | Medical                      | Cross-sectional               | Online        | March and April 2020                    | NR              | 411             | 68.4              | 94.6                    |
| 30 | Zhang et al. [57] | China         | Healthcare students          | Cross-sectional               | Online        | 16–20 August 2021                       | NR              | 631             | 79.71             | 77.81                   |
| 31 | Zhou et al. [58]  | China         | Nursing                      | Cross-sectional               | Online        | 4–20 January 2021                       | NR              | 1070            | 82.1              | 51.9                    |

Notes: NR, Not Reported.
3.3. Prevalence of Vaccine Acceptance and Hesitancy

The estimated total COVID-19 vaccination acceptance rate among HCSs was 68.8% (95% CI: 60.8–76.3% $I^2 = 100\%$) (Figure 2). Talarek et al. [56] observed the highest acceptance rate (95.6%, 95% CI: 92.0–96.6%) in a study in Poland. The study in Kazakhstan by Bolatov et al. [40] reported the lowest vaccination acceptance rate of 22.4% (95% CI: 19.7–25.3%).

![Figure 2. COVID-19 vaccine acceptance rates among healthcare students by study.](image)

The total estimated COVID-19 vaccination hesitancy rates among HCSs was 25.8% (95% CI: 18.5–33.8% $I^2 = 99\%$) (Figure 3). Mahdi [50] reported the highest hesitancy rates in Iraq (66.2%, 95% CI: 62.8–69.4%), and the lowest rate of hesitancy was found in Poland (3.9%, 95% CI: 2.6–5.7%) by Szmyd et al. [55].
Figure 3. COVID-19 vaccine hesitancy rates among healthcare students by study.

3.4. Sub-Group Analysis

Figures 4 and 5 present country-specific COVID-19 vaccine acceptance rates among HCSs. The pooled prevalence of the highest acceptance rate was observed in Romania (88.0%, 95% CI: 44.5–100%), followed by Italy (87.8%, 95% CI: 58.3–100%, $I^2 = 98$%), Israel (87.0%, 95% CI: 58.7–100%, $I^2 = 84$%), Brazil (84.0%, 95% CI: 38.4–100%), and India (78.0%, 95% CI: 45.3–98.0%, $I^2 = 99$%).

Figure 4. Map of COVID-19 vaccine acceptance rates among healthcare students by country.
Country: Brazil  
Chaves et al., 2021  
210 250 84.0 (79.9; 88.3) 3.3%  
Random effects model 250 84.0 (38.4; 100.0) 3.2%  
Heterogeneity: not applicable

Country: China  
Jiang et al., 2021  
1258 1488 84.4 (82.5; 86.2) 3.2%  
Random effects model 1291 2196 59.0 (56.7; 60.0) 3.3%  
Zhang et al., 2022  
491 631 77.8 (74.4; 81.0) 3.2%  
Zhao et al., 2021  
555 1070 51.9 (45.8; 54.9) 3.2%  
Random effects model 5385 69.0 (65.2; 73.4) 3.3%  
Heterogeneity: $I^2 = 99\%$, $\chi^2 = 0.0612, p < 0.01$

Country: Egypt  
Sadat et al., 2021  
744 2133 34.9 (22.9; 36.9) 3.3%  
Random effects model 2133 34.9 (1.7; 68.6) 3.3%  
Heterogeneity: not applicable

Country: Ethiopia  
Mone et al., 2022  
247 420 58.8 (55.9; 63.6) 3.2%  
Random effects model 420 58.8 (14.1; 95.8) 3.2%  
Heterogeneity: not applicable

Country: India  
Kumar et al., 2021  
955 1068 63.0 (60.0; 67.5) 3.2%  
Jain et al., 2021  
418 655 76.0 (45.3; 98.6) 6.5%  
Random effects model 1723 76.0 (25.3; 92.6) 6.5%  
Heterogeneity: $I^2 = 99\%$, $\chi^2 = 0.0612, p < 0.01$

Country: Iraq  
Mahdi, 2021  
274 810 33.6 (30.6; 37.2) 3.2%  
Random effects model 810 33.6 (1.7; 80.6) 3.2%  
Heterogeneity: not applicable

Country: Israel  
Katz et al., 2021  
95 104 91.3 (84.2; 96.0) 3.1%  
Rosental et al., 2021  
516 628 82.9 (79.9; 85.1) 3.2%  
Random effects model 732 87.0 (56.7; 100.0) 6.4%  
Heterogeneity: $I^2 = 84\%$, $\chi^2 = 0.0612, p < 0.01$

Country: Italy  
Baligh et al., 2021  
341 422 80.0 (76.7; 84.5) 3.2%  
Lucia et al., 2020  
782 838 93.3 (91.4; 94.9) 3.2%  
Random effects model 1260 87.9 (58.3; 100.0) 6.3%  
Heterogeneity: $I^2 = 18\%$, $\chi^2 = 0.0612, p < 0.01$

Country: Kazakhstan  
Bolotov et al., 2021  
199 888 22.4 (39.0; 69.9) 3.2%  
Random effects model 888 22.4 (1.9; 69.9) 3.2%  
Heterogeneity: not applicable

Country: Poland  
Godło et al., 2021  
301 793 38.0 (34.6; 41.4) 3.2%  
Groczyńska et al., 2021  
295 419 70.6 (66.0; 75.0) 3.2%  
Linczer-Pawłowska et al., 2021  
269 350 76.1 (72.1; 81.2) 3.2%  
Szymul et al., 2021  
632 887 92.5 (90.7; 93.9) 3.2%  
Talorok et al., 2021  
389 411 94.6 (92.0; 96.6) 3.2%  
Random effects model 2668 76.9 (58.6; 92.3) 16.1%  
Heterogeneity: $I^2 = 99\%$, $\chi^2 = 0.0612, p < 0.01$

Country: Romania  
Bălănescu et al., 2021  
1391 1581 88.0 (86.3; 89.5) 3.2%  
Random effects model 1581 88.0 (44.9; 100.0) 3.2%  
Heterogeneity: not applicable

Country: Slovenia  
Petrovič et al., 2021  
414 624 66.3 (62.5; 70.0) 3.2%  
Random effects model 624 66.3 (20.1; 98.3) 3.2%  
Heterogeneity: not applicable

Country: Uganda  
Kanyike et al., 2021  
224 600 37.3 (33.5; 41.1) 3.2%  
Random effects model 600 37.3 (2.8; 82.9) 3.2%  
Heterogeneity: not applicable

Country: USA  
Jendrzej et al., 2021  
89 197 45.2 (38.1; 52.4) 3.2%  
Keleher et al., 2021  
128 167 75.6 (68.2; 81.8) 3.2%  
Kleier et al., 2021  
135 248 54.4 (46.0; 60.7) 3.2%  
More et al., 2021  
129 167 75.4 (68.2; 81.6) 3.2%  
Morrning et al., 2021  
486 1099 43.3 (42.2; 44.4) 3.2%  
Mooaareee et al., 2021  
138 248 54.8 (46.4; 61.1) 3.2%  
Munyar et al., 2021  
1772 1890 93.3 (92.1; 94.4) 3.3%  
Random effects model 3955 64.9 (46.6; 81.2) 22.4%  
Heterogeneity: $I^2 = 99\%$, $\chi^2 = 0.0612, p < 0.01$

Random effects model 29660 66.8 (60.8; 76.3) 100.0%

Figure 5. COVID-19 vaccine acceptance rates among healthcare students by country.

Country sub-group analyses are presented in Figure 6. Iraq showed the highest rates of vaccine hesitancy (66.2%, 95% CI: 35.5–90.8%), followed by Egypt (45.5%, 95% CI: 17.5–
75.5%), Ethiopia (41.2%, 95% CI: 14.0–71.8%), China (37.1%, 95% CI: 23.0–52.6%, $I^2 = 99%$), and the U.S. (33.4%, 95% CI: 17.4–51.4%, $I^2 = 92%$).

Country sub-group analyses are presented in Figure 6. Iraq showed the highest rates of vaccine hesitancy (66.2%, 95% CI: 35.5–90.8%), followed by Egypt (45.5%, 95% CI: 17.5–75.5%), Ethiopia (41.2%, 95% CI: 14.0–71.8%), China (37.1%, 95% CI: 23.0–52.6%, $I^2 = 99%$), and the U.S. (33.4%, 95% CI: 17.4–51.4%, $I^2 = 92%$).

![Graph showing COVID-19 vaccine hesitancy rates among healthcare students by country.](image)

**Figure 6.** COVID-19 vaccine hesitancy rates among healthcare students by country.

### 3.5. Time Trends

COVID-19 vaccine acceptance rates decreased with time (Figure 7). During 2020, the pooled acceptance rate was 75.0% (95% CI: 63.5–85.0%, $I^2 = 99%$). The acceptance rate in 2021 was only 62.8% (95% CI: 51.3–73.6%).
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Lower COVID-19 mortality rates attributed to high belief rates in conspiracy theories and high dependence on social media platforms to obtain vaccine-related information [64].

Fear of becoming infected could have influenced vaccine acceptance levels. Studies were conducted during the early stages of the pandemic, when countries were experiencing increasing rates of COVID-19-related mortality. Fear of becoming infected could have significantly influenced vaccine acceptance rates.

A recent study reported that among 25 countries, 10 high-income countries received a median of 51.7% more vaccine doses than their low-income counterparts (31–14.9%) despite high rates of authorization [63]. Furthermore, most of these studies were conducted during training and clinical practice. It is necessary to prioritize vaccinations for this group. To our knowledge, no systematic review or meta-analysis had been conducted on vaccination acceptance and hesitancy rates among healthcare students.

4.1. Summary of the Main Findings

Figure 7. COVID-19 vaccine acceptance rates among healthcare students by year.

3.6. Predictors of Vaccine Acceptance

Figure 8 presents the potential predictors associated with COVID-19 vaccine acceptance among HCSs. Sex, place of residence, previous history of vaccination, and concern about the vaccination side effects were considered. Only one factor—concern about potentially serious side effects of vaccines (n = 3 studies, OR = 0.2, 95% CI: 0.1–0.4)—was significantly associated with lower acceptance rates.

Figure 8. Predictors of COVID-19 vaccination acceptance among healthcare students.

3.7. Risk of Bias

All 31 studies were assessed to be of the highest possible quality based on the JBI technique (Table S1). Studies that used ineffective recruitment methods like convenience and snowball sampling via social media were not removed, but their results may not have been representative of the population.
We observed no risk of publication bias. The Egger’s tests among studies of vaccine acceptance (p-value = 0.64) and vaccine hesitancy (p-value = 0.97) were not significant (Figures S1 and S2).

4. Discussion

4.1. Summary of the Main Findings

Vaccines have been revolutionary in their the potential to end the COVID-19 pandemic [38]. However, vaccine hesitancy remains high and an important obstacle in many vaccination programs [59,60]. Vaccine skepticism is on the rise among healthcare workers due in part to the rapid development of these vaccines [61]. Healthcare students can act as role models in their communities to increase trust about the safety of vaccinations [38]. Furthermore, healthcare students are frontline workers likely to be exposed to COVID-19 during training and clinical practice. It is necessary to prioritize vaccinations for this group. To our knowledge, no systematic review or meta-analysis had been conducted on vaccination acceptance and hesitancy rates among healthcare students.

The current study systematically reviewed and analyzed the data from 30,272 healthcare students across the world. Our pooled estimations showed that approximately two-thirds of healthcare students were willing to accept a COVID-19 vaccine. Meanwhile, approximately one-quarter were hesitant about accepting a COVID-19 vaccine. Such rates are similar to those observed in general populations [10] and healthcare workers [62]. One potential explanation for these findings is that healthcare students may be exposed to large amounts of health-related information, which may make them more aware of the vaccine’s serious side effects and thus influence their decision to be vaccinated [18].

Country-wise, pooled results found that healthcare students from comparatively high-income countries like Romania, Poland, Italy, and the U.S. were more likely to accept a COVID-19 vaccine than students in other countries. One possible explanation is that vaccines were more prevalent in higher-income countries, making it easier for students to receive vaccinations. A recent study reported that, among 25 countries, 10 high-income countries received a median of 51.7% more vaccine doses than their low-income counterparts (31–14.9%) despite high rates of authorization [63]. Furthermore, most of these studies were conducted during the early stages of the pandemic, when countries were experiencing increasing rates of COVID-19-related mortality. Fear of becoming infected could have influenced vaccine acceptance levels.

Low vaccine acceptance and high vaccine hesitancy were observed in Middle Eastern and African countries (e.g., Kazakhstan, Egypt, and Iraq). Middle Eastern results may be attributed to high belief rates in conspiracy theories and high dependence on social media platforms to obtain vaccine-related information [64]. Lower COVID-19 mortality rates might have influenced vaccine acceptance rates in African countries [65]. In addition, people in Africa have a history of vaccination skepticism, which may have contributed to low acceptance rates [66]. Traditionally, many African groups have shown poor health-seeking behaviors because of spiritual considerations that limit vaccination uptake [67].

Our study found that vaccine acceptance among healthcare students decreased over time. Earlier studies have also found that vaccine acceptance varies over time [68]. For example, a global systematic review on vaccine acceptancy rates reported a decline from 79% in March–May to 60% in June–October of 2020 [10]. This finding could be explained by the fact that students during the early stages of the pandemic were more fearful of being infected, which motivated them to receive a vaccine. Similar findings were observed among Egyptian medical students [6]. Additionally, Wong et al. [69] reported that individuals who were more fearful of COVID-19 demonstrated greater willingness to receive a vaccine due to the perceived benefit of immunization reducing the risk of infection. With time, healthcare students were exposed to more professional information, which likely influenced their decisions. Recent research shows that the observed decreases in vaccination intentions may be caused by COVID-19-related misinformation, as well as public worries about vaccine safety [70,71].
Finally, we found that concerns about serious side effects of COVID-19 predicted vaccine acceptance. A similar finding was observed in Egypt, where 74% of medical students reported that side effects were major barriers of vaccine acceptance [6]. Another study conducted among Egyptian healthcare professionals (HCWs) found that 57% of HCWs were unwilling to accept a vaccine due to their belief that vaccines were unsafe [72]. Such findings could be explained by students being doubtful of vaccine efficacy due to its rapid development. However, it is worth mentioning that different countries and regions often use different types of vaccines, and potential side effects vary, which may also influence vaccine hesitancy from study to study.

4.2. Implications

COVID-19 vaccinations should be prioritized for frontline workers since they are critical to COVID-19 responses and are at high risk of infection. Given the low degree of intention to vaccinate against COVID-19 among healthcare students, it is necessary to boost vaccine acceptability rates in this population. The majority of countries agree that frontline workers should be immunized against COVID-19 [27]. Our systematic review could be an initial step, as it estimated country-wise vaccine acceptancy and hesitancy coverage among healthcare students. This information could help decision-makers determine where and how to prioritize vaccine distribution. It is critical to focus on establishing confidence in COVID-19 vaccinations among this population. Governments of each country could mandate vaccination policies for not only healthcare workers but also healthcare students.

4.3. Strengths and Limitations

This study has a number of strengths. It is the first comprehensive meta-analysis study on vaccination acceptability among healthcare students that we are aware of. All of the publications considered in this review were judged as high-quality observational studies. Our evaluation considered the most recent study findings when calculating the final vaccination acceptance rate.

Our review also has limitations. First, our search was confined to three databases (Scopus, PubMed, and Web of Science). Other databases, such as Embase, PsycINFO, CINAHL, PMC, or NCBI were not searched. Secondly, we excluded preprints and unpublished grey literature. Given the spike in COVID-19 papers throughout our research period, we may have reached a different outcome if preprints or unpublished grey literature were included. Third, the data collection period for the included studies was from 2020 to early 2022, which may have influenced the findings due to the fact that public sentiments regarding vaccination change over time. Fourth, most of the reviewed research was cross-sectional and performed through online surveys. Conclusions from online research are prone to clarity and self-selection bias [73]. Finally, we were unable to investigate some potential determinants of vaccine acceptance owing to data constraints.

5. Conclusions

Healthcare students were moderately willing to accept a COVID-19 vaccine as of March of 2022. Romania and Kazakhstan showed the highest and lowest vaccine acceptance rates, respectively. Vaccination acceptance rates among healthcare students decreased from 2020 to 2021. Healthcare students who expressed concerns about the potential side effects of the vaccine were less likely to accept a vaccine.

Governments should prioritize vaccine distribution to frontline healthcare workers, including students, as soon as safe vaccines are available. These efforts should be coupled with comprehensive educational programs that reinforce the safety of vaccines to healthcare students. Previous studies indicate that vaccine-exposed medical students have positive attitudes toward vaccines. If more healthcare students are vaccinated, they can relate their positive experiences to their patients and increase vaccine uptake in the general public.
Supplementary Materials: The following supporting information can be downloaded at: https://www.mdpi.com/article/10.3390/vaccines10050806/s1, Figure S1: Funnel plot of vaccine acceptance among healthcare students. Figure S2: Funnel plot of vaccine hesitancy among healthcare students.; Table S1: Quality assessment of included studies.

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