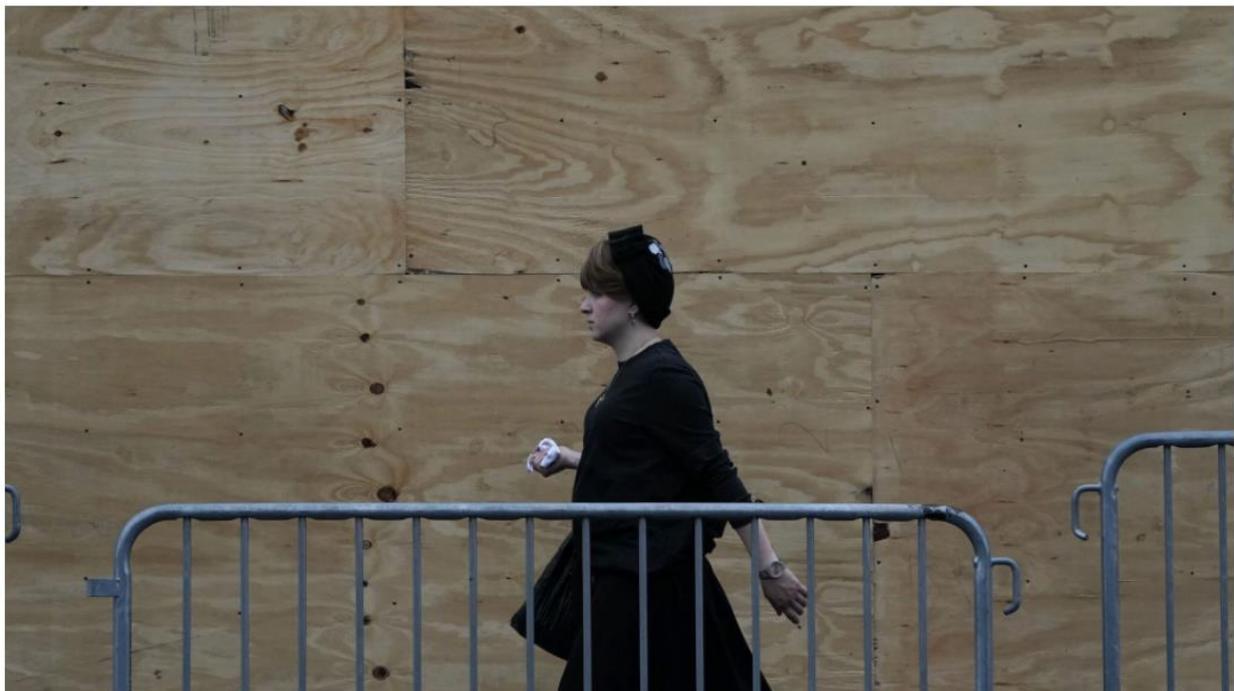


HEALTH

## In Orthodox communities where pregnancy is prized, vaccines and variants leave women confused and afraid

BY SHIRA HANAU      FEBRUARY 7, 2021



An Orthodox Jewish woman is seen in a Brooklyn neighborhood on September 29, 2020 in New York. (Timothy A. Clary/AFP via Getty Images)

(JTA) — For much of the last year, the young mothers of Lakewood, New Jersey, have experienced the pandemic as much as a nuisance as a matter of life and death.

That's not to say the community hasn't experienced its share of outbreaks; it has. Or that families haven't lost loved ones; they have. But to hear the young mothers of the large Orthodox community tell it, the crisis part of the pandemic had passed. Most people recovered from the virus, they thought, and only the elderly and high-risk needed to continue staying home. And to watch the Instagram videos of the frequent indoor weddings held in the

town, where few if any guests wear masks, the dark days of last March have nearly been forgotten.

To many, a lockdown that kept the town's thousands of yeshiva students home from the local Beis Medrash Gevoha, the largest yeshiva outside of Israel, for months on end was not a price they were willing to pay. With children and young people at relatively low risk of death or serious illness from COVID, keeping kids home from school seemed to many to be more harmful than the virus itself.

That has changed in recent weeks, as news of the death of a 37-year-old woman understood to be previously healthy swept through WhatsApp groups at the same time that misinformation took hold about the new coronavirus vaccines potentially threatening fertility. In a community where childbearing and mothering are marks of status among women, the two developments brought the pandemic's seriousness home for many of the town's young mothers.

Now, as physicians there and across the Orthodox world mount a campaign to convince women to get vaccinated when they're eligible and to be more careful if they're not, some mothers in Lakewood are reconsidering their families' approach to COVID safety.

"These stories are not making us any less concerned to say the least," said one 30-year-old Lakewood resident who is pregnant. She had been looking forward to getting the coronavirus vaccine until her own COVID-19 test came back positive last week, making her ineligible for the time being.

Lakewood, with a haredi Orthodox community that makes up more than half the town's population of over 100,000, is by far New Jersey's most fertile town. In 2015, it recorded 45 live births per 1,000 residents — a rate more than four times the state's average, and among the highest in the world. So when rumors started circulating about the effect of the soon-to-arrive COVID-19 vaccines on fertility, locals were alarmed.

The rumors began right around the time New Jersey began offering vaccines, and they took root on Instagram and WhatsApp, the social network and messaging platform that are popular among Orthodox women.

In one WhatsApp group organized by Orthodox Jews to discuss COVID, a woman said she had been thinking of moving to Israel but was

reconsidering after the mayor of the Israeli city of Lod said he would require parents to be vaccinated before their children could come to school.

In another group, women compared Israel's recommendation that pregnant women get the vaccine to Nazi doctors' torture of Jews. "Disgusting!! They are really making experimentation on Jews!!" one woman wrote.

Several people shared information about a drug cocktail created by a Hasidic doctor, Vladimir Zelenko, that Donald Trump touted but was later found to be ineffective and even harmful in some cases. Someone else shared a video of Zelenko in which he said that young, healthy people do not need to take the vaccine. He suggested taking zinc to inhibit "viral replication" and said "in my medical opinion, no one needs the vaccine."

In early January, Michal Weinstein, an Orthodox Instagram influencer who lives on Long Island and has over 21,000 followers, posted an Instagram livestream of Dr. Lawrence Palevsky, a pediatrician and well-known anti-vaxxer who spoke at a 2019 symposium of anti-vaccine activists that was attended by hundreds of haredi Orthodox Jews in Monsey, New York. In the video, Palevsky suggested that the vaccines were a profit move by drug companies — and that they could contribute to infertility.



Women walk through Williamsburg, home to a large Orthodox Jewish community, on April 10, 2019 in New York City. (Spencer Platt/Getty Images)

Tova Herskovitz, a 30-year-old mother of four living in Tom's River, New Jersey, a large Orthodox community neighboring Lakewood, said many of her friends are confused about the vaccine and don't know who to trust.

"It's scary to know that there are women who are saying whatever they want about this vaccine," she said, noting that Instagram influencers popular in the Orthodox community have spread misinformation about the vaccines. "A lot of my friends follow these people."

Dr. Mark Kirschenbaum, a pediatrician with a practice in Borough Park and Williamsburg, both Hasidic communities where weddings and other social events resumed their pre-pandemic pace months ago, said that he thinks about 20% of his patient families are "vaccine skeptical." Most vaccinate their children for other diseases because of school requirements, he said, but the COVID-19 vaccines are currently optional if you can get one at all. The speed of their development and their newness means he expects even more skepticism.

"People have more of a fear of the vaccine than the virus," Kirschenbaum said.

To combat that fear, the Orthodox health care professionals who spent last year exhorting their communities to take pandemic guidelines seriously are now turning their attention to building confidence in the new vaccines.

The Jewish Orthodox Women's Medical Association, an organization for Orthodox women doctors and medical students, has been debunking misinformation in a fact sheet and podcast that it produces. And a group of Orthodox Jewish nurses are hosting a weekly call to discuss the vaccines, to take place on hotlines that are accessible to women who do not use the internet for religious reasons and at a time, 9 p.m. on Thursdays, when most kids are in bed and women are often cooking for Shabbat.

"Even if you're not on the internet, there's a barrage of information and disinformation to try and dissuade people" from being vaccinated against COVID-19, said Tobi Ash, a nurse in Miami and one of the founders of EMES, an organization promoting science-based medical information in the Orthodox community, which is organizing the call. "It's very difficult to sift out information that's accurate."

Orthodox doctors said they've been getting dozens of phone calls about the safety of vaccines over the past two months, many with questions about whether the vaccines are safe for young women or for women who are already pregnant.

Rabbi Dr. Aaron Glatt, the chief of infectious diseases and hospital epidemiologist at Mount Sinai South Nassau on Long Island and an assistant rabbi at the Young Israel of Woodmere, a large Orthodox synagogue in Long Island's Nassau County, said he'd gotten questions from parents of young women who are starting to date and who will want to conceive soon after getting married, asking whether the vaccine could be a problem.

"If somebody asks me, I absolutely recommend that they take it," Glatt said. "You're dealing with a real risk of dying or having serious complications from COVID versus a theoretical risk when there's no real theoretical reason why it should be dangerous."

He added: "There is zero evidence to suggest there's any risk with infertility."

In Lakewood, a health clinic called CHEMED raised the alarm on COVID cases among younger women and said some of the cases were resulting in miscarriages.

"Unlike at the beginning of the pandemic, when mostly the elderly and males were at risk, we are now seeing several hospitalizations of women in the 35-45 year old range," they wrote in a message published by The Lakewood Scoop. They advised pregnant women to speak to their doctors about whether they should get the vaccine, "regardless of whether or not you have previously had Covid."

Some in the communities cite changing guidance from health authorities as a cause of confusion.

The new coronavirus vaccines made by Pfizer and Modern have not been tested on pregnant women, leading the World Health Organization to originally advise that only pregnant women who are at high risk for complications from COVID get vaccinated. But over time a consensus has emerged that pregnancy itself represents a risk factor, and the WHO has changed its advice, though it still does not advise the vaccine for all

pregnant women and recommends women speak to their doctors. New Jersey includes pregnancy in a list of conditions entitling people to early vaccines; New York just added it as well.

The education campaigns may get a boost from multiple unfortunate stories, in Israel and at home in Lakewood. In Israel, six pregnant women who were hospitalized in serious condition were found to be infected with the newer British COVID variant, prompting the Israeli government to prioritize pregnant women for vaccination.

And in Lakewood, locals were stunned to learn last month of the death of Basha Rand, a 37-year-old mother of three who lived in neighboring Tom's River. A death notice in a local publication did not specify the cause of death, but a post in that publication sharing a fundraiser for Rand's family and apparently written by Rand's sister said she died of COVID, though a family member could not be reached to confirm.

Rand was not pregnant, but she was an archetype of an Orthodox mother, having moved from Nevada to New Jersey not long before her death so her children could attend yeshiva and her eldest could attend an Orthodox high school.

"Bashie was my daughter's speech therapist for the past few months," one person commented on a local news site's post about a fundraiser for Rand's family, which has raised over \$450,000. "I never met someone as kind and caring and devoted as her."

Local volunteers with the Covid Plasma Initiative, which connects people who have tested positive for COVID to hospitals and outpatient clinics administering monoclonal antibody treatment, have been encouraging pregnant women to consider the treatment if they become ill. But even some volunteers with the project, like Chedva, a high school teacher in Lakewood, say they aren't sure about whether the vaccine makes sense for everybody.

Chedva and her husband, who is high-risk for complications, got the vaccine last week. "If I thought it was something really unsafe, I would not have gotten it myself," she said.

But she isn't sure she would make the same calculation for her daughter, who is 20 years old and living in Israel where she works from home and her

husband has already had COVID. (Israel is now vaccinating anyone over the age of 16.) She had heard rumors about the vaccine causing fertility issues and wasn't sure what to believe, especially because the vaccine is so new.

"I've definitely heard from doctors that one should not get pregnant immediately after getting the vaccine," she said. "You don't say that about a flu shot." (The Center for Disease Control has said that "women who are trying to become pregnant do not need to avoid pregnancy after receiving an mRNA COVID-19 vaccine.")

On the other hand, she said, when it comes to her community in Lakewood, Chedva said she had heard about two or three more pregnant Orthodox women who became seriously ill with COVID in the last week alone. She hopes women will be more cautious.

"I had a 22-year-old last week with double pneumonia," she said. "There's been a lot more of that going around so we're trying to get the word out to be extra careful."