

COVID-19 vaccine is correlated with favourable epidemiological indicators in the Auvergne-Rhône-Alpes region (France): An ecological study

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1 COVID-19 vaccine is correlated with favourable epidemiological indicators in the

2 Auvergne-Rhône-Alpes region (France): an ecological study.

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16 Data availability

The open-data repository of all epidemiological data publicly available used in this analysis is
available at https://www.data.gouv.fr/fr/organizations/sante-publique-france/. The specific datasets
used are available at the following URLs:

- Infection data: https://www.data.gouv.fr/fr/datasets/donnees-relatives-aux-resultats-des tests-virologiques-covid-19/, file named "sp-pos-quot-dep-YYYY-MM-AA-HHhmm.csv"
- Vaccination data: https://www.data.gouv.fr/fr/datasets/donnees-relatives-aux-personnes vaccinees-contre-la-covid-19-1/, files named "vacsi-dep-YYYY-MM-AA-HHhmm.csv" and
- 24 "vacsi-reg-YYYY-MM-AA-HHhmm.csv"
- Reproduction number and hospitalisation data:
- 26 https://www.data.gouv.fr/fr/datasets/synthese-des-indicateurs-de-suivi-de-lepidemie-covid-
- 27 19/, file named "table-indicateurs-open-data-dep- YYYY-MM-AA-HHhmm.csv"
- 28 All specific datasets used in this analysis and the scripts are available on demand.

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- 34 Keywords:
- 35 COVID-19
- 36 SARS-CoV-2
- 37 Vaccine impact
- 38 Ecological study
- 39 Open data

40 Abstract (141 words)

41 COVID-19 vaccination has proven to be effective in preventing severe cases, reducing viral load, and 42 transmissibility. The aim of this study was to evaluate the impact of vaccination 11 months after 43 implementation on epidemiological indicators and the effective reproduction number in one French 44 region. We plotted four indicators with vaccination coverage as the explaining variable and estimated 45 the impact of vaccination using the reduction rates in infections and hospital admissions. A reduction 46 of 98% in COVID-19-related hospitalisation 11 months after the vaccine campaign began in January 47 2021 has been reported while vaccine coverage increased over time. Those results do not make it 48 possible to postulate a causal relationship but do support the effect of vaccination against multiple 49 variants of concern. Non-pharmaceutical measures remain necessary to attain complete epidemic control. Open epidemiological data should be considered to monitor vaccine effectiveness wherever 50 possible. 51

52 Introduction

53 COVID-19 vaccination started in France in January 2021 in the context of an elevated 54 incidence rate of new SARS-CoV-2 infection cases, estimated at 180/100,000 the first calendar week 55 of 2021. Elderly individuals in long-term care facilities constituted the first target population for the 56 vaccine with a progressive extension of target populations between January, 1st and May, 12th. On 57 that date, vaccination was open to the general population 18 years and older without prioritisation 58 based on active comorbidities.

59 Clinical studies have now demonstrated the benefit of the vaccines beyond protection against the development of severe cases of COVID-19 with an efficacy between 60% and 85% (1,2), a 60 61 reduction in viral load among asymptomatic carriers (3,4) and therefore, a reduction in 62 transmissibility (5,6). Vaccine coverage requirements to reach herd immunity in the general 63 population have also been estimated to be approximately 70% (7,8). Although previously cited estimations were found against strains not yet showing mutations of concern, efficacy of currently 64 65 available vaccines against the delta variant was found to be comparable regarding hospital admissions and lower (with varying estimates) regarding infection (9,10). Additional and convergent 66 67 results from various locations based on various study designs are needed to confirm the positive impact of the vaccines on the pandemic since health determinants differ from one country to 68 69 another. The monitoring of the COVID-19 pandemic in France is built on reactive information systems for fast and adapted public health response. Standardised data collection from validated sources by 70 71 the national public health agency (Santé publique France) enable analysis in real time of 72 epidemiological indicators including national vaccine coverage in various French regions (11).

The objective was to report a graphical ecological analysis to correlate the increase in vaccination use by time with the epidemiological indicators of viral circulation in the Auvergne-Rhône-Alpes region, including the effective reproduction number (R_e) until November 15, 2021.

76 Methods

77 This study was conducted in the Auvergne-Rhône-Alpes French administrative region 78 (estimated population in 2020: 8,032,377 inhabitants, capital: Lyon), between January 1 and 79 November 15, 2021. The study region is highlighted in Fig. 3. We collected the following weekly publicly available epidemiological indicators for all 12 administrative subdivisions (French 80 81 departments) of the region: SARS-CoV-2 new infection rate (/100,000 person-week), rate of hospital 82 admissions for COVID-19 (/100,000 person-week), proportion of testing positivity for SARS-CoV-2 83 carriage (/100 persons tested), and vaccine coverage (partial and complete, /100 inhabitants). Partial 84 and complete vaccine coverage are respectively defined as incomplete (lacking one dose) and 85 complete vaccination (excluding boosters) with respect of previous COVID-19 and altered immune 86 response at an individual level according to the French national guidelines from the French "Haute 87 Autorité de Santé". We do not take into account for booster injections, as we do not have sufficient 88 cases and data to provide any meaningful results. Infection data (incidence rate, positivity rate) are 89 collected from the national testing information system, hospital admission data from the victim 90 information system, and vaccination data from the national vaccination information system. We also 91 collected the estimated R_e, computed weekly from infection data following the method described in 92 Cori et al. (12), only available for the entire region. Every dataset used in the analysis was colligated 93 by the national public health agency (Santé publique France), and mandated to be available through 94 the French government open-data platform (11). The information systems collected personal data in 95 compliance with French law and regulations (13–15).

96 We plotted pandemic-related indicators (Y axis) as a function of vaccine coverage (X axis) for 97 each day all indicators were estimated. To provide a meaningful visualisation of the lockdown and 98 curfews periods on the figures, regional vaccine coverage observed at the beginning and end of each 99 relevant period was used. The impact of vaccination was calculated using the formula cited by Hanquet et al. (16): $IMPACT = \frac{IR_{pre-vaccine} - IR_{post-vaccine}}{IR_{pre-vaccine}} = 1 - IRR^{1}$, with the incidence rate on 100 101 December 15, 2020 as a pre-vaccine reference. This impact estimation was calculated for the region 102 and all of its 12 subdivisions on November 15, 2021. To account for the delay between vaccine injection and effective immunization, all vaccine-related indicators were joined with the 103 104 epidemiologic indicators using a 14-day lag. The R software (17) with ggplot2 (18) and mgcv (19)

¹ With IR : incidence rate ; IRR : incidence rate ratio

packages was used. Penalized cubic regression spline was used to produce tendency lines and their respective confidence interval (with α risk = 0.05).

107 **Results – Discussion**

108 A total of 3240 repeated measurements of incidence rate, % of positive testing, hospital 109 admissions and 90 measurements of Re according to partial or complete vaccine coverage are plotted 110 in Figs. 1 and 2 respectively. The national control measures active during the study period were a first 111 curfew (Dec 15 to April 2, 2021, orange), one lockdown (April 3 to May 2, 2021, red), and a second 112 curfew (May 3 to June 20, 2021, orange). During both curfews, public movement was restricted from 113 the evening until morning, with the starting hour varying between 6 and 8 PM. The lockdown mainly 114 reintroduced limited movement to a short perimeter around one's house at all times, and suspension 115 of on-site work if not necessary. In Fig. 1, panels a-d show a decrease in viral diffusion within the 116 general population until May 3, 2021, end of the second curfew. Infection rate trends past this date 117 do not appear associated with vaccine coverage for the number of infection cases, although the 118 dispersion seems to decrease at a high level of vaccine coverage. Panels e and f indicate a similar 119 trend among hospital admissions until the end of the first curfew. Compared to the indicators 120 monitoring viral circulation within the general population, hospital admissions appear less correlated 121 to viral circulation as vaccine coverage increases, with dispersion noticeably lower as vaccine 122 coverage is high. Fig. 2 graphically links the underlying effective reproduction rate of SARS-CoV-2 in 123 the French population and vaccine coverage. This figure suggests no impact of vaccine coverage on 124 the increase in viral circulation within the general population: the reproduction rate is observed 125 above 1 at various levels of vaccine coverage within the study region. Table 1 provides a numerical 126 description of the impact of COVID-19 vaccines in the 12 administrative subdivisions of our study 127 region, showing a strong decrease in the incidence rates of hospital admissions with an estimated 128 impact of 0.98 in the region. This result is homogeneous across the region, with a minimum of 0.72 in 129 one department regarding hospital admissions. The estimated impact of vaccination upon both viral 130 circulation indicators is considerably more mitigated, with a regional mean estimated at 0.21, and 131 departmental estimates ranging between -0.55 and 0.59.

This study presented an overview of the relationship between epidemiological indicators and vaccine coverage in one French region over 11 months. Accounting for the lockdown and curfews during the study period, those results suggest an impact of vaccination on hospital admissions and to a lesser degree on the proportion of individuals testing positive. Of course, the ecological nature of this study prevents us from drawing further conclusions since we could not account for all of the factors involved in the natural evolution of the current pandemic such as mask-use or other nonpharmaceutical preventive measures. The lack of individual-level data prevents us from proposing a causal link between the studied indicators although such proposals have already been published. However, ecological results remain a useful tool to comfort findings from clinical studies and analytical epidemiological studies, especially considering the challenges to confirm a causal effect of vaccine against an active, recent, and partially understood pandemic.

143 The results regarding hospital admissions must be assessed with respect to the varying 144 advancement of the vaccination campaign among ages: as old age is a determinant risk factor for 145 severe COVID-19, the impact of vaccination is likely associated with an effective coverage among the 146 elderly. By June 1, 2021, within the study region, complete vaccination coverage reached above 75% 147 for individuals aged 75 or more and 58% between 70 and 74, with all other age groups below 37%. By 148 November 15, 2021, final date of the study period, complete coverage reached 75% at minimum 149 (among individuals aged 20 to 25). This signals a differential impact of vaccination in the first 150 semester of 2021 with a likely stronger effect on hospital admissions than during the second 151 semester.

We took advantage of multiple reliable and exhaustive data collection systems to diffuse encouraging trends regarding vaccination effects on the pandemic mitigation effort. Owing to the public effort to make these datasets open to the general public in France and abroad, this class of analysis can be easily replicated in one or multiple nations and to a degree included in the general surveillance of vaccine effectiveness.

157 The present analysis was conducted between January 1 and November 15, 2021, a timeperiod marked by two emerging variants of concern. The alpha variant reached 45.7% of prevalence 158 159 among infection cases mid-Febuary, peaked at 89% mid-April and was pushed back to 50% by June 160 21 as Delta reached 43.1% a week later, and over 90% by July 19 (20). Those results are coherent with previous literature regarding vaccine efficacy on severe cases and infection and considering the 161 162 genetic variability of SARS-CoV-2 during the study period, support the effect of vaccination against 163 multiple variants of concern. The Auvergne-Rhone-Alpes region may not be representative of the 164 country, but epidemiological studies performed in this area included a total population of more than 165 8 million inhabitants and could generate results that could be compared with other areas in France 166 or other countries in Europe with neighbouring demographic indicators such as Switzerland or 167 Austria.

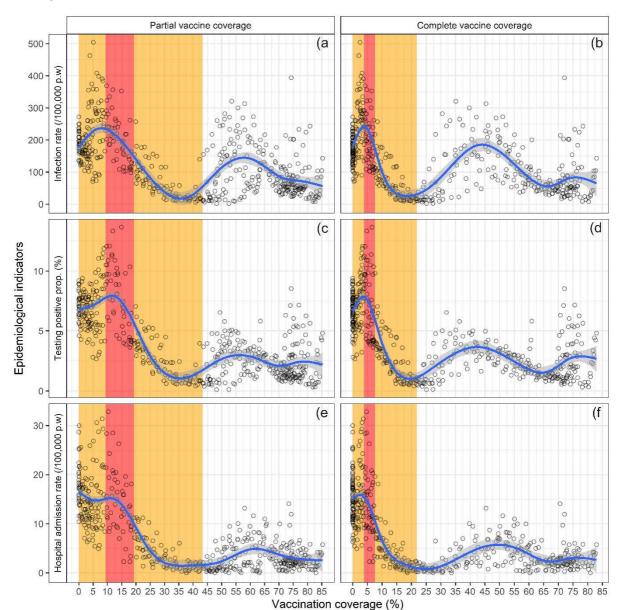
168 In conclusion, these results support an encouraging control of COVID-19 in France since the 169 implementation of vaccinations. Variant emergence, appropriate individual preventive measures,

- 170 non-pharmaceutical interventions and vaccines constitute the major determinants of the future
- 171 spread of SARS-CoV-2 in France.

172

173 Figures and tables

- 174 Fig. 1: SARS-CoV-2 Incidence infection rate, SARS-CoV-2 test positive proportion and hospital
- admission rate by reported COVID-19 vaccination coverage, Auvergne Rhône-Alpes region, France,



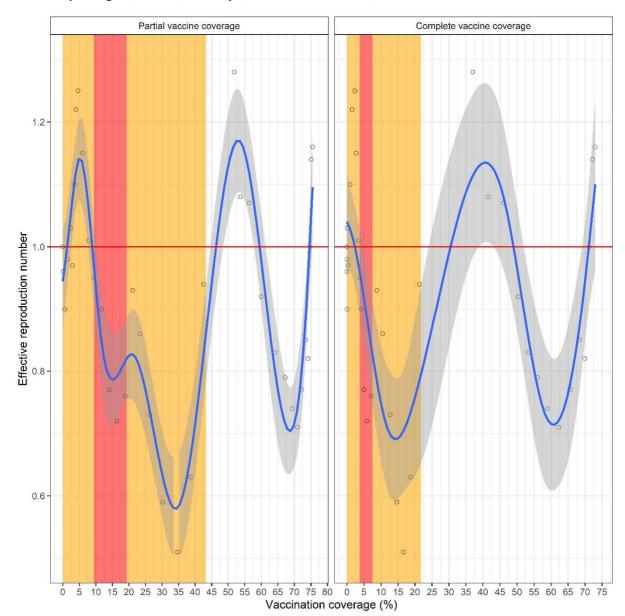
176 January 1, 2021-November 15, 2021

177

Each point in this figure represents one measure of one epidemiological indicator as a function of vaccine coverage in one of the 12 administrative subsets of the Auvergne-Rhône-Alpes region. Vaccine coverage was matched to the indicator measured with a 14-day lag to consider the time to acquire immunization. The grey area around the tendency line represents the 95% confidence interval. The orange area represents the curfew period, the red area the lockdown period.

183 p-w: person-week

184 Fig. 2: Reproduction number with respect to level of COVID-19 vaccination coverage, Auvergne



185 Rhône-Alpes region, France, January 1, 2021- November 11, 2021

186

Each point in this figure represents one measure of the effective reproduction number as a function of vaccine coverage in the Auvergne-Rhône-Alpes region. Vaccine coverage was matched to the indicator measured with a 14-day lag to consider the time to acquire immunization. The grey area around the tendency line represents the 95% confidence interval. The orange area represents the curfew period, the red area the lockdown period. The horizontal red line represents the stability value 1.0 for the effective reproduction number. The R_e calculations were based on the method by Cori et al.(12).

195Table 1: estimations of vaccine impact between December 15, 2020 and November 15, 2021 in the

196 Auvergne-Rhône-Alpes region and its 12 departments

Department	01	03	07	15	26	38	42	43	63	69	73	74	Region
Population (thousands)	657	331	327	143	521	1,265	765	227	660	1,876	433	828	8,032
Infection incidence rate on December 15, 2020 (reference period)	161	207	187	148	174	211	164	133	132	185	160	188	178
Hospital admission incidence rate on December 15, 2020 (reference period)	8.2	32.0	14.1	11.9	15.0	21.2	9.5	22.9	11.1	17.5	24.3	16.7	16.7
Infection incidence rate on November 15, 2021	131	103	242	86	114	128	129	101	86	135	149	104	131
Hospital admission incidence rate on November 15, 2021	0,30	4,83	6,42	2,80	3,27	3,64	3,40	1,76	2,42	3,46	4,85	2,78	0,30
Partial vaccine coverage (%), on November 15, 2021	64	85	74	84	79	73	80	75	76	81	77	75	64
Complete vaccine coverage (%),on November 15, 2021	61	83	72	82	77	71	77	74	75	79	76	74	61
Impact on infection incidence rate on November 15, 2021)	0,21	0,31	-0,55	-0,03	0,29	0,28	0,23	0,26	0,21	0,16	0,23	0,59	0,21
Impact on hospital admissions) on November 15, 2021)	0,98	0,87	0,72	0,83	0,82	0,86	0,82	0,93	0,81	0,86	0,83	0,88	0,98

197 The incidence rate unit is /100,000 person-week

198 *Interpretation: a 98% reduction in hospital admission rate was observed between December 15,

199 2020 and November 15, 2021 across the region

200 The included departments are named as follows: Ain (01), Allier (03), Ardèche (07), Cantal (15),

201 Drôme (26), Isère (38), Loire (42), Haute-Loire (43), Puy-de-Dôme (63), Rhône (69), Savoie (73), Haute-

202 Savoie (74).

203 Figure 3: Auvergne-Rhône-Alpes and its administrative subdivisions (departments) among all

204 French administrative regions (continental and overseas)



205

Source : GEODES – Santé publique France / 2020 – IGN-Admin Express – IGN-Insee. Obtained from
 https://geodes.santepubliquefrance.fr.

- 208 The included departments are named as follows: Ain (01), Allier (03), Ardèche (07), Cantal (15),
- 209 Drôme (26), Isère (38), Loire (42), Haute-Loire (43), Puy-de-Dôme (63), Rhône (69), Savoie (73), Haute210 Savoie (74).
- 211

212 Declaration of competing interests

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