

PSA: Don't search for the COVID-19 vaccine online

While governments are phasing in COVID-19 vaccines based on risk and exposure criteria, Canadians are looking to skip the queue and get the vaccine through unofficial channels.

Research by cybersecurity company NordVPN shows that in January, queries of the phrase "covid vaccine online" tripled (+264%). However, the search volumes of the French keyphrase "vaccin en ligne" and all of its variants gained less traction since December.

Most queries for "covid vaccine online" are coming from Alberta and Saskatchewan. Meanwhile Nova Scotia, Ontario, and Manitoba show much lower interest in getting the vaccine online.

Quebeck has lost the interest entirely, after the early search hype back in October-November.

The vaccines are being distributed to governments and not available for purchase from private entities. However, people are eager to get their jabs as soon as possible, looking for vaccines under the counter. According to the officials, the widespread vaccine distribution may not be finalized until late September.

A treasure trove for scammers

"Wherever there is demand, fraudsters' reaction is swift. Sadly, those who will try to get the COVID-19 vaccine under the counter will fall victim to a scam," says Daniel Markuson, digital privacy expert at NordVPN.

According to Bleeping Computer, 40 cybercriminal gangs in Europe earned at least \$6.5M impersonating popular classifieds, marketplaces, and delivery services. "It's just a matter of time until Canada takes down a similar gang as the dark web is brimming with fraudulent offers," says Daniel Markuson.

The Australian National University discovered 645 COVID-19 listings across 12 dark web markets in a single day.

"First of all, be cautious, follow the official information, and avoid anything that resembles a black market. But scammers may go further than just placing their offers on the dark web. They will send emails and texts as well as promote their "offers" on social media. Do not fall for fake promises. Besides, when you get a message inviting you to take a vaccine, be sure not to click on lookalike domains with spelling errors, like çanada.com," adds the digital privacy expert at NordVPN.

What to expect from online fraudsters in the nearest future?

Bad actors usually exploit fears or feed the need for urgency. Once more and more people get vaccinated, the gears will shift to exploit the fears attached to the vaccine's side effects. People who got the official jab might get informed they have received a potentially dangerous vaccine. They might be prompted to register for a "check-up" to make sure they are not developing some additional disease.

Please note: For the methodology, NordVPN researchers used Google's search term analysis tools for terms "covid vaccine online" and "vaccin en ligne". The analysis was based on search volumes in the last 12 months the keyphrases started gaining significant traction in November. Time frame: January 14, 2020-January 15, 2021.