

Doctors miss opportunities to offer flu shots

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Doctors should make a point of offering a flu vaccine to their patients. A simple reminder could considerably reduce the number of racial and ethnic minorities who currently do not vaccinate themselves against this common contagious respiratory illness. This recommendation is based on research led by Jürgen Maurer of the University of Lausanne in Switzerland and the RAND Corporation in the US. Their findings are published in the *Journal of General Internal Medicine*.

Up to 50,000 Americans die annually of influenza and related diseases such as pneumonia. The number of people who regularly get flu shots are below the targets set in the US federal government's Healthy People 2020 prevention agenda. Even more worrying is that adults especially from the more vulnerable ethnic and racial minority groups are less

likely to be vaccinated, even though they do not necessarily have anything against using such preventative measures.

Previous research shows that people from minority groups generally get vaccinated in a doctor's office, rather than in a non-medical setting such as at the workplace or a drug or grocery store. Healthcare professionals are typically a trusted source of health information and often influence patients' decisions of whether or not to get a [flu shot](#). Doctors, however, do not seem to always offer it to visiting patients, despite being advised to do so by the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Maurer's research group wanted to find out what the influence of converting such "missed opportunities" could have on the number of Americans getting vaccinated against the flu. To do so, they analyzed data from a national Internet survey, in which 3,418 Americans of different race groups were asked about their willingness to be vaccinated against flu if their healthcare provider strongly recommended it to them on a future visit.

Maurer's team found that during the 2009-2010 influenza season 42.6 percent of white study participants were vaccinated. Only 32.6 percent of black respondents and 30.1 percent of Hispanic respondents were, even though they visited [healthcare professionals](#) at the same rate as non-Hispanic white Americans. Combining this information about the occurrence of healthcare provider visits with information on self-reported willingness to get vaccinated, Maurer's team estimated that the overall number of "missed opportunities" was between 10 and 20 percent, and 4 to 7 percentage points higher among racial and ethnic minorities than non-Hispanic whites. Maurer therefore believes that offering flu shots more frequently could increase adult vaccination rates to around 50 percent or above for all racial and [ethnic groups](#) and halve the current racial and ethnic disparity in [flu](#) vaccination rate.

"Improved office-based practices regarding influenza vaccination could significantly impact Healthy People 2020 goals by increasing influenza vaccine uptake and reducing corresponding racial and ethnic disparities," says Maurer.

More information: Maurer, J. et al (2014). Can routine offering of influenza vaccination in office-based settings reduce racial and ethnic disparities in adult influenza vaccination? *Journal of General Internal Medicine*. [DOI: 10.1007/s11606-014-2965-z](https://doi.org/10.1007/s11606-014-2965-z)

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