

High-risk individuals favor doctor's offices for vaccines

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The ongoing wave of new COVID-19 infections and recent booster recommendations have made the need for efficient distribution of COVID-19 vaccines even more urgent, particularly for high-risk

individuals with chronic medical conditions.

Putting more vaccines in the hands of primary care physicians might help, according to new research from the University of Georgia. The researchers analyzed data on flu [vaccine](#) uptake among high-risk individuals, which could help inform where these individuals may want to receive COVID-19 vaccines.

How can a flu study help us with COVID-19 vaccinations?

The team, led by UGA College of Public Health associate professor Janani Thapa, wanted to know where people at high risk for contracting severe COVID-19—individuals with chronic medical conditions like heart disease, diabetes and cancer—were more likely to access a vaccine.

"Understanding vaccine location used by high-risk patients for flu vaccination can inform COVID-19 vaccine distribution and vaccine promotion strategies," said Thapa.

Annual flu vaccines are one of the few regular vaccinations that adults have to get, and studies have shown that many people tend to get their flu vaccine at the same place every year.

"If someone goes to their [local pharmacy](#) every year for their [flu shot](#) because that's their habit, we interpret that to mean that that local pharmacy was probably a convenient or comfortable place for them to receive vaccinations," said study co-author Victoria Fonzi, who worked on this study as a public health graduate student.

So, they turned to survey data from the 2018 Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System, which asked over 430,000 adults from across the

U.S. questions about a range of health and risk behaviors.

The 2018 survey included data on whether respondents got a flu vaccine and where they received it. Among those surveyed, just over 164,000 said that they had a flu vaccine that year. The researchers grouped these respondents into high-risk and low-risk groups for COVID-19, using age, body mass index, smoking behavior and chronic health conditions.

Then, they analyzed the likelihood that a high-risk person would get a flu vaccine at various vaccine locations, also factoring in variables like race and ethnicity or marital status, which could affect vaccine location preferences. They included five vaccine locations: doctor's offices, stores, state-affiliated locations, community centers and hospitals.

High-risk individuals seek easy access to vaccines

They found that among the high-risk group, 46% sought out flu shots at their doctor's office, followed by stores at 31%, leaving only 23% who received their shot at a state [location](#), community center or hospital.

These findings underline the role of primary care clinics in the vaccine rollout effort. Not only are these locations comfortable and convenient for high-risk groups, talking with a physician has been shown to be one of the best ways to overcome vaccine hesitancy.

There's also good news for areas where access to primary care is an issue.

"Stores and pharmacies have several advantages because more people have access to them. About nine in 10 Americans live within 5 miles of a community pharmacy, making them more geographically accessible than others," said co-author Kiran Thapa, a doctoral student at the College of Public Health.

This study may also be useful in pre-planning for booster COVID-19 vaccine distribution, the authors say.

The study, "Using Influenza Vaccination Location Data from the 2018 Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System (BRFSS) to Expand COVID-19 Vaccination Coverage," was published in the *International Journal of Environment Research and Public Health*.

Faculty co-authors include Heather Padilla, Mahmud Khan, Curt Harris and Glen Nowak with the University of Georgia, and Kishor Luitel with Middle Tennessee State University.

More information: Victoria Fonzi et al, Using Influenza Vaccination Location Data from the 2018 Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System (BRFSS) to Expand COVID-19 Vaccination Coverage, *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* (2021). [DOI: 10.3390/ijerph18157753](https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph18157753)

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