

Certain parents more likely to skip kids' flu shot

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(HealthDay)—Children who see "alternative" health providers, such as

acupuncturists or massage therapists, are less likely than other kids to get their annual flu shot, a new study suggests.

Researchers found that of nearly 9,000 U.S. kids, those who'd received certain [alternative therapies](#) were one-quarter to 39 percent less likely to have gotten a flu shot in the past year.

The findings do not prove a cause-and-effect connection, however.

No one knows whether any alternative medicine providers advised parents against having their kids vaccinated, said Dr. Gregory Poland, an infectious disease expert who was not involved in the study.

But, he added, some alternative-therapy practitioners do tend to "reject certain aspects of evidence-based medicine."

So it's possible they sometimes influence parents' decisions on flu vaccination, said Poland, a spokesperson for the Infectious Diseases Society of America and a professor of medicine at the Mayo Clinic, in Rochester, Minn.

No one is saying that kids should not receive complementary and alternative medicine—what researchers call CAM.

"There is nothing inherently wrong with using CAM," said William Bleser, a research assistant at Pennsylvania State University who worked on the study.

He noted that, based on other research, most people who use alternative therapies do it in conjunction with conventional "Western" medicine.

But when parents use CAM, they should be open about it with their pediatrician, so everyone is on the same page, said Bleser and colleague

Rhonda BeLue, an associate professor of health policy and administration at Penn State.

Patients might also benefit if medical doctors and CAM providers communicated with each other, the researchers said.

The new study findings are based on nearly 9,000 kids, aged 4 to 17, whose families took part in a national health survey. The results were published online Oct. 3 in *Pediatrics*.

Overall, around 4 percent to 8 percent of kids had ever received an alternative therapy for "health reasons" (other than vitamins or minerals).

It turned out that children who'd received certain CAM therapies were less likely to have gotten a flu shot in the past year.

These included kids who'd been treated through "alternative medicine systems," such as acupuncture, naturopathy and homeopathy; or body-based therapies, like massage, chiropractic manipulation and craniosacral therapy, which is done to relieve pain and tension.

Roughly one-third of kids who'd received such therapies had gotten a flu shot, versus 43 percent of other kids, the study found.

The study authors did weigh other factors—like parents' education levels and income—and CAM use was still linked to lower odds of [flu vaccination](#).

It's possible, Poland said, that parents who are drawn to alternative therapies are also more skeptical about vaccines in general.

However, the study did not look at vaccinations other than the flu shot,

BeLue pointed out. So it's not clear whether parents who brought their [kids](#) to CAM providers tended to be more leery of vaccines.

The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention advises everyone aged 6 months and older to get a flu shot each year.

But only about 59 percent of U.S. children and teenagers have gotten the vaccine in recent flu seasons, the agency says.

Some people dismiss the flu shot as ineffective, Poland said.

It's true, he said, that the vaccine's effectiveness varies season to season. It has to be reformulated each year, to protect against the viral strains that researchers believe will be most prevalent in the coming flu season.

According to the CDC, the [flu shot](#) typically cuts people's risk of infection by 50 to 60 percent during seasons where the vaccine is a good match for the viral strains in circulation.

"It's not 100 percent effective," Poland said. "But it's a good vaccine, and it's far wiser to get it than to skip it."

Most children who contract the flu recover with no problems. But children younger than 5 are at relatively greater risk of [flu complications](#), including potentially life-threatening ones such as pneumonia and inflammation of the heart or brain, he explained.

And even a run-of-the-mill bout of the flu is nothing to sneeze at, Poland added.

"Kids will be out of school," he said. "Parents have to take time off from work, other family members will become infected—and it's just miserable."

More information: The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention has more on [the flu and vaccination](#).

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