



## SHAC Experts Explain Why Students Need Their Flu Shots

BY Nicole Creaturo | Oct 27, 2015

*Influenza is a serious and sometimes fatal condition that affects millions of Americans each year (according to the Center for Disease Control). Despite its annual occurrence and widespread effects, there are still some common misconceptions about the flu, specifically about whether or not you should get a flu shot. Dr. James Wilterding, Associate Medical Director at Student Health and Counseling (SHAC), and Lisa Leahigh, Charge Nurse Specialist at SHAC's Allergy and Immunization Clinic, explain why some UNM students say they do not get their flu shot, and why they're hoping they*

### **What are some reasons students give when they don't get their flu shot?**

Leahigh: The two most common things I hear people say when they decline a flu shot is: "I got the flu from the flu shot", or, "I never get sick, so I don't need the flu shot."

### **Is that true? Could they get the flu from the flu shot?**

Leahigh: You can feel malaise after getting a shot, but you cannot get the flu from the flu vaccine. I think what happens is, that because some people are getting the flu shot during seasons when influenza is circulating, colds are circulating, other respiratory viruses are circulating, they get sick and they think, "oh this is cause and effect", but that's not the case. You cannot get influenza from the components in the flu vaccine.

### **The Center for Disease Control (CDC) has said that last year's flu shot was not as effective as it has been in years past. Why is that?**

Wilterding: It's a moving target, always. The flu virus is mutating constantly. The CDC and the World Health Organization, the people responsible for creating the vaccines, they use these very sophisticated models to predict what strains are going to be prevalent next year. And they have to predict them in enough time to actually allow for the manufacturing of millions of doses of the flu vaccine. So occasionally, they're off just a little bit. But they're trying to pick the three flu strains that would give the broadest range of immunity at any given time.

Leahigh: Regardless, even when it's not a well-matched year, some protection is better than no protection.

### **Some students don't think they need to get a flu shot, maybe because they're young, and serious complications from the flu generally affect much older, at-risk people. What would you say to them?**

Wilterding: Older people are not the only ones who are at-risk when it comes to the flu. A common condition that many students have, asthma, places them at increased risk for getting very sick with the flu. Also, people who have any type of chronic disease, especially those with respiratory disease, rheumatic disease, diabetes or cardiac disease or who are immunosuppressed are at an increased risk.

Leahigh: Also traditionally at-risk groups are not always the ones who are most affected by novel viruses. For example, with H1N1 influenza, some of the people who were most vulnerable were younger than usual, including college-aged students. When you see signs for our flu shot clinics in the SUB, they say “Take One for Raymond”. That’s because Raymond Plotkin, who was one of our students here at UNM, actually died of influenza in 2009.

### **So people shouldn’t be more afraid of taking the flu shot than they would be of taking any other medication?**

Wilterding: What people should think about is this: Although it’s slightly different every year, the basic formulation of the flu shot and the side effects don’t really change. We now have 30 years of experience with the flu shot vaccine, billions of doses administered. So if there was a pattern of a very concerning side effect, we would see it and know. So in the scheme of risks and benefits, the benefit of the vaccine protecting your health far outweighs the risk of getting the flu shot.

### **If I don’t get my flu shot, am I the only person taking that risk?**

Wilterding: One goal of immunizations that is important for students to know about, is the idea of “herd immunity”. When enough people in the population have been vaccinated, it allows us to protect really vulnerable people, like infants and the elderly, the ones who tend to have the most severe illness and the highest death rates from influenza. By getting immunized we’re actually protecting them by not having so much of the influenza virus traveling around.

Leahigh: Certainly if people are planning on traveling, internationally or within the U.S. over the holidays, that’s another reason they should get vaccinated.

### **How can you tell if you’re getting the flu?**

Wilterding: A lot of people really haven’t had influenza, and they tend to think that influenza is just a bad cold. What’s really important for people to understand is that the flu is a whole other level of being sick. Influenza typically starts with the abrupt onset of a high fever, headache, muscle aches and intense fatigue. Most people also experience a sore throat, runny nose and cough. It takes between one to three days to get sick after being exposed, and you can infect others for up to one week.

### **What should students do if they think they have the flu?**

Leahigh: Get a lot of rest, a lot of fluids, monitor their temperature and take a fever reducer if they need to. They should avoid public spaces for sure, and practice good handwashing. But certainly, if they’re having difficulty breathing, experience dizziness, feel like they are getting worse and not getting better, develop a high fever, those are warning signs and they should come in and be assessed.

Wilterding: Also, if they have asthma or other concurrent health problems, they should come in and be seen. They should let us know they might have influenza, so we can get them into an area where they won’t expose other patients at the clinic.

### **If a student lives on campus, and they think they have the flu, would you recommend that they lay low and stay in their dorm room?**

Leahigh: We actually have these flu kits that we distribute to the dorms with influenza information, temperature probes, and other stuff students would need. If someone thinks they have the flu, they can notify their RA who will provide them with a flu kit.

**Would you recommend that everybody get their flu shot?**

Leahigh: Absolutely, I already got mine.

*Student Health and Counseling will be administering free flu shots to students, staff and faculty on October 26th, October 27th, November 2nd and November 3rd. All flu shot clinics will be open from 10am-2pm in the SUB Atrium. You must be 18 years old or older to get your free flu shot.*