

Health

Children are dying from flu. Some provinces are slow to report it – and these experts say that's dangerous

Influenza deaths among Canadian kids running higher this year than in typical flu season

[Mike Crawley](#) · CBC News · Posted: Dec 18, 2022 2:00 AM MST | Last Updated: December 18, 2022



Health-care workers are shown in the intensive care unit at Toronto's Hospital for Sick Children on Wednesday, Nov. 30. Only a few weeks into this flu season, 11 deaths have already been reported among children and teens across the country, according to research by CBC News. (Chris Young/Canadian Press)

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With influenza sending Canadian children to hospital at rates far above normal for this time of year, there are calls for provincial health systems to be more transparent about pediatric flu deaths.

Influenza rarely kills children in Canada. Over the past decade, there have never been more than 13 deaths in a year from the flu among those age 19 or younger, and the pre-pandemic yearly average was nine, according to Public Health Agency of Canada figures.

Yet only a few weeks into this flu season, 11 deaths have already been reported among children and teens across the country, according to research by CBC News.

- [**Health officials urge parents to have children vaccinated amid 'dramatic increase' in flu cases**](#)
- **Q&A** [**How to protect yourself from a triple-threat of viruses this holiday season**](#)

Flu death numbers not easily available

The provinces have not made it easy to find out how many kids have died from flu this year.

Earlier this month, British Columbia [announced](#) publicly that the flu had killed at least five children in November, but only after the details of an internal conversation involving hospital officials was leaked to a media outlet earlier this month.



A child receives her influenza vaccine with her family at a Fraser Health vaccination clinic in Surrey, B.C., on Dec. 7. Experts say the transparent reporting of child flu deaths makes it clear that people should treat the illness seriously. (Ben Nelms/CBC)

At the same time, when CBC News asked other provinces about pediatric flu deaths, officials in Ontario declined to provide any statistics.

Only [Alberta](#) provided information right away: two children in that province have died of flu so far this fall. [Manitoba](#) reported one death this week, and [British Columbia](#) has now confirmed six pediatric deaths linked to flu.

Some experts say providing timely information about the severity of a communicable disease like the flu can help people protect themselves and in this case, their kids.

- **THE DOSE** [2 Montreal children have died from group A strep complications. Here's what parents need to know](#)
 - **Q&A** [The difference between a strep A infection and strep throat](#)
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"Not being transparent about the number of children dying due to the flu is dangerous for our children," said Irwin Elman, Ontario's former child advocate. (There is no current child advocate in the province because the position was eliminated by Premier Doug Ford's government early in its first term.)

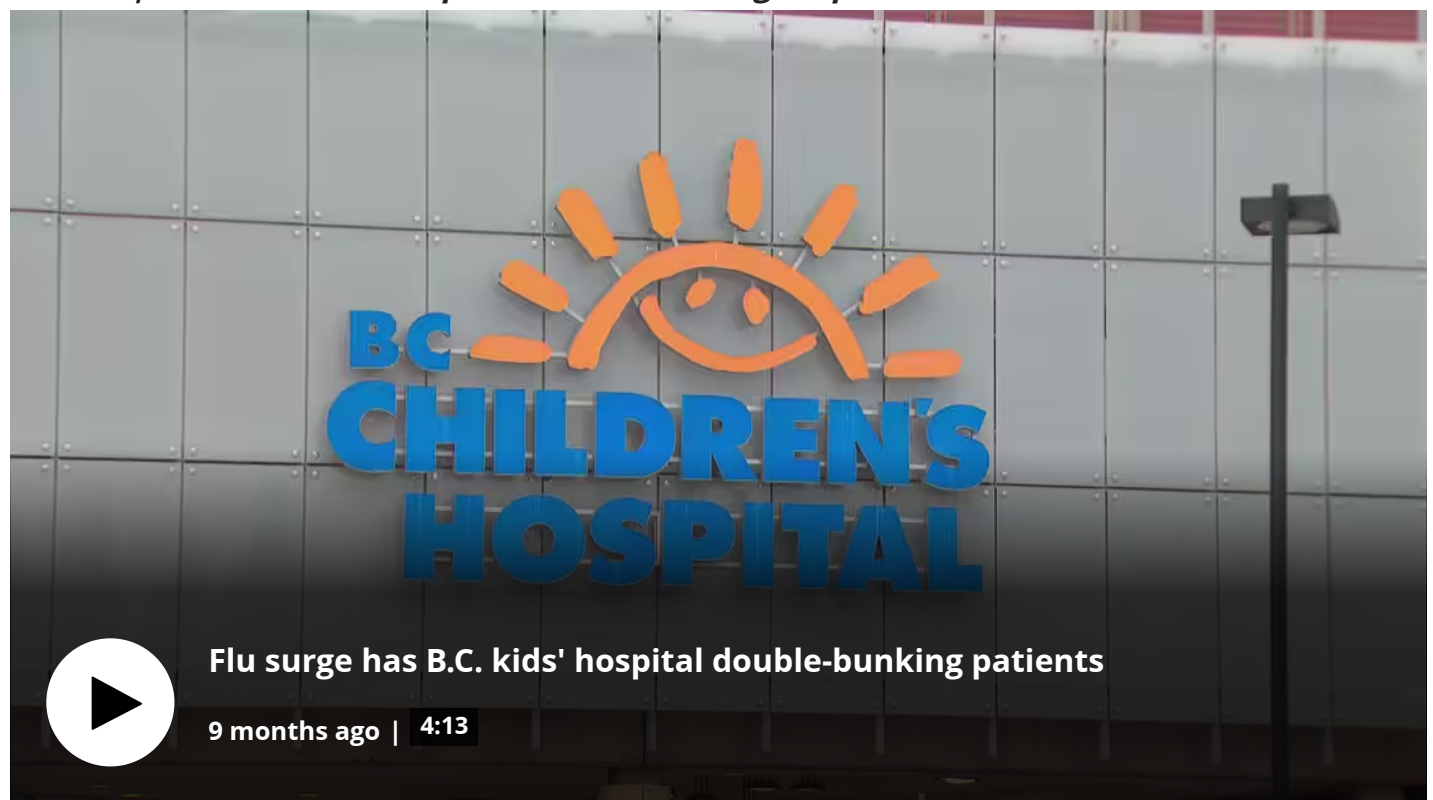
"I see no reason why releasing the numbers would be an affront to anybody's privacy," said Elman in an interview.

Reporting B.C. deaths triggered surge in flu shots

Dr. Rod Lim, head of pediatric emergency at the London, Ont., Health Sciences Centre, said the take away for people from transparent reporting of child flu deaths is to treat the illness seriously.

"We know that this is an extremely difficult influenza season across Canada," said Lim during a virtual news conference organized by the Ontario Medical Association this week.

WATCH / B.C. children's hospital double bunking flu patients:



The surge in influenza cases has B.C. Children's Hospital getting ready to double-bunk patients in single rooms. At least six children have died in B.C. after contracting the flu this fall.

"If the numbers are accurate and reliable, that kind of information can help inform the public and can be useful to encourage people to seek and listen to public health advice," he said.

B.C.'s revelation of its pediatric flu deaths provides a concrete example of how this can work: it triggered a [surge](#) in parents bringing their kids to get vaccinated against the flu.

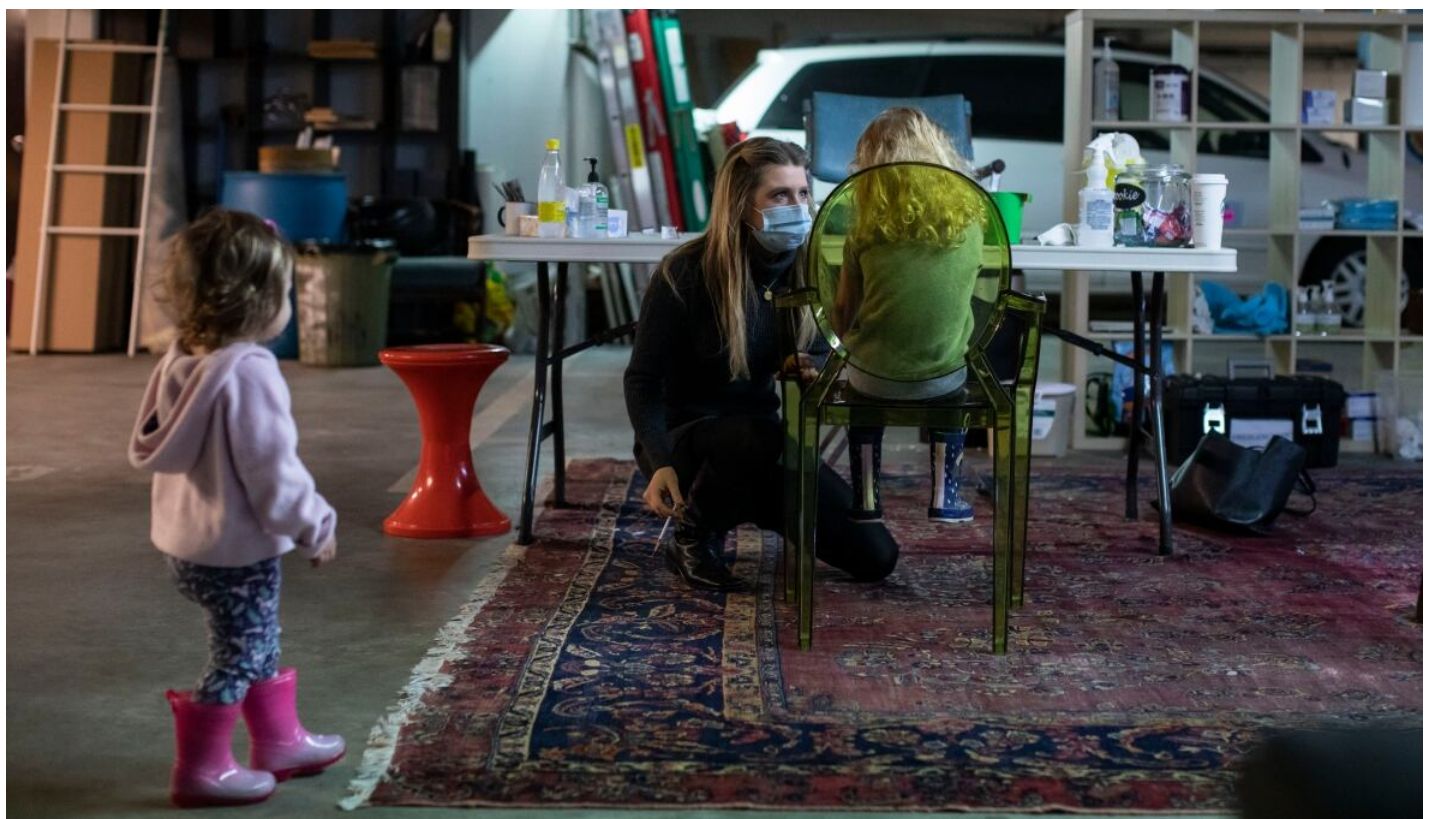
- [Why doctors recommend you get a flu shot this week](#)
- [B.C. launches flu vaccination blitz after deaths of 6 children and youth](#)

A spokesperson for the B.C. Coroners Service, which released the statistics, said in an email: "Part of our role is to improve public safety, and we wanted to ensure the public was aware."

Transparency key, health officials say

Dr. Theresa Tam, Canada's chief public health officer, was asked whether there's a benefit to public reporting of child flu deaths.

"Information is extremely important for informing the population about measures to take to protect themselves, that is a fundamental aspect of public health," said Tam in a news conference this week.



In October 2020, doctors at the South Hill Family Health Centre in Vancouver provided flu shots to their patients in their underground parking lot. (Ben Nelms/CBC)

The Public Health Agency of Canada's weekly [flu watch report](#) issued Friday tallies only five pediatric deaths so far this season. That is due to a lag after provinces confirm the deaths before they are added to the federal report.

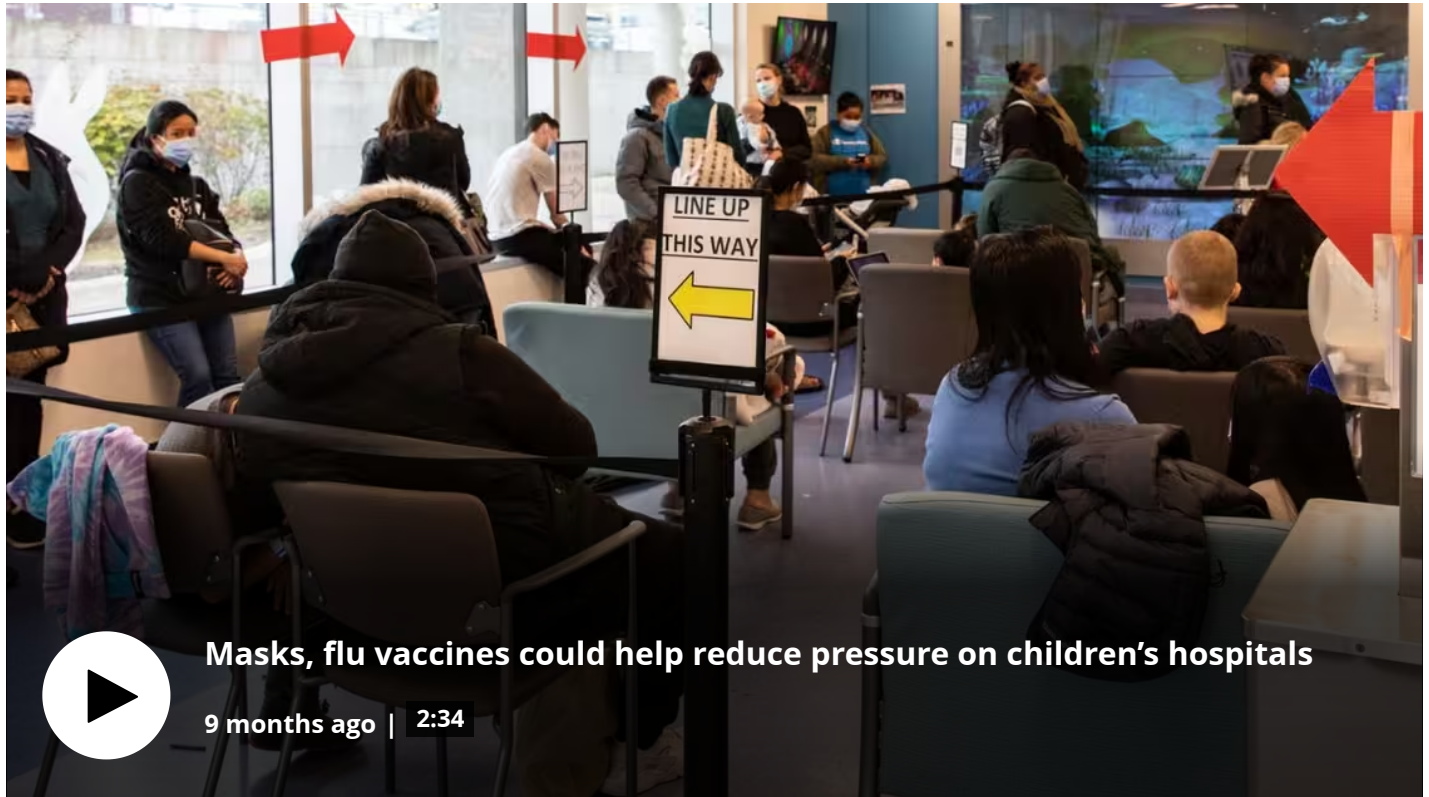
"We've gained some capacity from the COVID experience to show that we are capable of monitoring specific health information in real-time in an urgent situation, so I think we can build on that," said Tam.

- [**CHEO flu admissions still soaring after near-record month**](#)
- [**Non-urgent pediatric surgeries postponed at Winnipeg children's hospital amid unprecedented flu season**](#)

When CBC News tried to establish how many children had died from flu in Ontario, three different provincial agencies refused to provide figures.

The office of the chief coroner said the information should come from Public Health Ontario (PHO), but PHO said to ask the Ministry of Health. A spokesperson for the ministry referred a CBC producer back to the public health agency.

WATCH | How masks and flu vaccines can help children's hospitals:



Masks, flu vaccines could help reduce pressure on children's hospitals

9 months ago | 2:34

Children's hospitals are being forced to take drastic measures to cope with an intense respiratory virus season, including one pediatric hospice that discharged its respite patients. Experts are calling for concrete solutions immediately.

Separately, a spokesperson for the Ministry of Health [told](#) the Ottawa Citizen that information about flu deaths in Ontario is not made public.

Dr. Kieran Moore, Ontario's chief medical officer of health, later contradicted that in an interview with CBC News this week and confirmed two pediatric flu deaths.

- [N.B. breaks record for flu cases and hospitalizations, as RSV and COVID-19 cases climb](#)
- [Dr. Strang urges caution during holiday season as flu season hits early](#)

"We don't cover up any of those facts," Moore said on Thursday.

"In Ontario, a sudden death of a child is investigated by a coroner and sometimes it takes time to do all of the investigation and aggregate that data," Moore said. "But you have a commitment from us, we want to be transparent with all of this data to Ontarians."

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