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Export date: Sat Oct 31 9:01:25 2026 / +0000 GMT

Health Canada approves COVID-19 shots for kids

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Health Canada authorized the use of Pfizer-BioNTech Comirnaty COVID-19 vaccine on children 5-11 last Friday (Nov. 19) and the Wellington?Dufferin?Guelph Public Health Unit (WDGPH) has announced a regional plan to get kids vaccinated.

Danny Williamson, spokesperson for WDGPHU, said the health unit received 17,100 doses of the Pfizer pediatric vaccine on Tuesday (Nov. 23) and residents can begin booking a vaccination appointment by contacting their primary care provider or visiting the WDGPHU website.

Similar to the adult vaccination program, the health unit will be running hub clinics in larger populated areas, mobile clinics in smaller municipalities, outreach pop-up clinics in areas of great need, clinics in schools with low vaccination rates, speciality clinics, and clinics at children's congregate settings/treatment centres.

Pfizer's study for the pediatric COVID-19 vaccine began in March of this year and concluded in September, with 4,500 kids participating. According to Pfizer's data, the shots were well tolerated and showed a robust immune response, with some side effects but none that were deemed serious.

Since the rollout of the COVID-19 vaccine worldwide, Williamson said the number of adverse reactions has been low relative to the number of shots administered, and using available data, WDGPHU sees the benefits outweighing the risks for vaccinating children.

?Ultimately, your risks are very low, and the risk of what happens if you get COVID, even if you're young are concerning,? he noted. ?So, it's very important that people have the information they need to confidently make a decision, whether that's from Public Health or another health agency, whether that's speaking with their family doctor.?

NACI Recommendation

The National Advisory Committee on Immunization (NACI), which provides the Government of Canada with technical advice regarding vaccines, released recommendations regarding the use of the Pfizer vaccine in children 5-11 on Nov. 18.

They provided a discretionary recommendation, stating the vaccines ?may be offered? instead of a strong recommendation, which would use the wording ?should be offered?, since the stronger recommendations is for when their advice applies to most individuals in a certain population unless there is a compelling alternative available. The discretionary recommendation means the vaccine may be considered for individuals in a population, but that the decision should be made considering individual benefits, risks, or local epidemiology.

?NACI will continue to monitor the information related to the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine for children, including how well it works and its safety profile, and will update its recommendations as required,? the NACI wrote in a statement on Nov. 18.

Chief Public Health Officer's Stance

Canada's Chief Public Health Officer Dr. Theresa Tam said she welcomes the NACI's advice on the Pfizer vaccine for 5?11-year-olds, noting that it takes into account available evidence and ethical considerations relating to COVID-19 vaccination in children.

She added that it's important for Public Health to support parents and be understanding of their choices with respect to vaccinating their 5 to 11-year-olds.

?As we closely monitor the domestic rollout of the pediatric program and continue to consider new information from international programs and research, it is very important that we all support children and their caregivers in making informed decisions about COVID-19 vaccination, while respecting their choices and pace of decision-making,? Tam tweeted on Nov. 19.

She also noted that while most children have no symptoms and experience only mild COVID-19 disease, some have required hospitalizations and may be at risk for long COVID, as well as multisystem inflammatory syndrome.

?Importantly, throughout the pandemic, children have experienced social isolation and disruption to schooling and extra-curricular activities, which has impacted their mental and physical well-being as well as that of their families,? Tam tweeted. ?As such, it is hoped that the availability of this vaccine in Canada will provide families with an additional means to consider in protecting their children from the health and collateral harms of the COVID-19 pandemic.?

Local Parents' Concerns

While many parents are excited to vaccinate their young children, providing them with better protection against COVID-19, some are hesitant due to the unknown long-term safety impacts of the COVID-19 vaccine and the virus's low risk to children.

?As a parent, I can tell you that I'm not quite sure what the government nor Public Health call safe when they talk about these vaccines. I'm not sure what their measure of safety is because when I looked at the data, there is no long-term data,? said Peggy Bond, local parent of a 12, 15, and 17-year-old. ?I write to them regularly asking for the evidence ? they do not reply to me at all.?

Bond said for healthy young people, who have no comorbidities, the risk of a severe reaction to COVID-19 is extremely rate. Because of this, she said the possible long-term risk of giving them the COVID-19 vaccine, in her view, outweighs the benefits since their risk of ICU admission, hospitalization or death is low.

?Statistically, with my kids being under 19, and even more so for those in the under 11 group, they have such a low risk of any severe outcomes, which would include hospitalization, or deaths? and I don't feel the risks of the vaccine are being clearly communicated.?

Since the start of the pandemic in March of 2020, a total of 19 individuals in the age 0-19 category have passed away with COVID-19, out of the nearly 30,000 COVID-19 deaths in Canada, while there have been 245 admissions to ICU for the 0-19 age group out of 17,552 total, according to Public Health Canada. The same data shows the 0-19 age group account for 1,951 out of 91,044 hospitalizations.

Meanwhile, in Ontario, since the start of the COVID-19 vaccine rollout, there has been 3,626 ?Other Severe or Unusual Events? which are defined as ?any death of a vaccine recipient linked to immunization within one month, where no other clear cause of death can be established? or ?Pregnancy-related events (E.g., maternal death, miscarriage/stillbirth)?. Since the start of the rollout, 11.2 million people have been fully vaccinated in Ontario, according to Public Health data.

Bond said while she sees no purpose for her own kids, who are healthy, to get vaccinated, she encourages parents to seek out the information necessary to feel confident in whatever their decision is.

?I feel everybody should make their own informed decision based on their own personal set of circumstances and their research,? she noted. ?But for me personally, in terms of risks, benefits and purpose, I don't feel that the benefits nor the purpose outweigh the unknown risks of the vaccine at this point.?

WDGPHU Stance on 5-11 Vaccine Passports

Despite Tam's recent comments about respecting parents' choices and pace of decision making for vaccinating their 5-11-year-olds, Williamson said WDGPHU would look at a provincial vaccine passport program for that age group favourably, as it's been shown to

help ?encourage? vaccination and reduce cases.

?If the province looked at expanding the coverage they have right now to include similar requirements for children in this bracket as they're able to get vaccinated, I think that that's something certainly we'd look at favourably, without kind of seeing the details of it yet,? said Williamson.

When asked if there were ethical concerns for imposing a vaccine passport onto 5 to 11-year-olds, since they have little choice in the matter as it's largely their parents' decision, Williamson said, ?Yeah, I mean obviously there are, and obviously we all want kids to have the access to the things that are important to them like we all do. But ultimately, like all things, we empower parents and caregivers to make decisions for their kids.?

He added, ?You'll hear a lot about Public Health talking to parents over the next couple of months to make sure they understand and they have what they need to make this decision?I think it is really important that parents do the research, have the conversations they need to put themselves in a place to really strongly consider it, because it offers so little risk and so many benefits.?

Alberta and Manitoba have announced they'll exempt 5 to 11-year-olds from their vaccine passport systems.

Ontario has yet to formally announce a decision on the matter.

Impact of Passports on 12-17

Since the implementation of the vaccine passport system in September of this year, Bond said the impact has been significant on her kids.

?I have a 12-year-old who I had to remove from hockey, he was so upset,? she said. ?It's terrible because of course, he's going to miss out on those benefits of participating in physical activity in a group environment with his friends, competing.

?The tenants of medicine are informed consent and this is not informed consent when you're holding something over people's heads, whether it's their livelihood, their ability to participate in society.?

Bond said pre-screening and testing should be options instead of entirely excluding youth from organized sports.

With the evolving science surrounding COVID-19 and the vaccinations, she noted that the government shouldn't be imposing vaccine passports to exclude unvaccinated people from select settings.

?I mean, they're discovering these side effects [from vaccination], because they're hitting the general population. My biggest issue with all of this is, first they say the first vaccine is the best vaccine, then they pull the AstraZeneca, then they change the ages of appropriateness for the Moderna [removed for 18 to 24-year-olds], then they change the times between the dosage schedule,? Bond remarked.

She said if Public Health is evolving with the science, then the science isn't settled, and we shouldn't be imposing a medical intervention onto people to engage in society, especially if they can become injured from said intervention and receive zero compensation. Vaccine manufacturers are protected from legal liability of adverse reactions.

A 12-year-old girl from Ontario who is unvaccinated and wants to keep her region as well as name anonymous due to the controversial and sensitive nature of the issue, said the past two months have been very challenging.

?I was really excited to do All Star Cheer this year but I couldn't do it because of the vaccine mandate. I practiced the whole summer to be ready for the try-outs. I felt so disappointed,? she told the Citizen. ?My best friend made the team and chose to get her vaccine so that she can continue doing cheer. We would have been doing Cheer together if not for the vaccine mandates. I hear her talking

about her practices and how much she enjoys it. It's hard knowing that I could have been there with her, but am not.?

The 12-year-old added, ?Sometimes, after school hours, my friends and I hang out at Tim Hortons. I have to wait outside since dinning in is restricted to vaccinated only. Even though they try to eat and drink quickly, I feel left out. I feel cold. I see them inside and wonder how come this seems right to others??