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This year's atypical flu season puts children at greater risk

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According to the latest estimates from CDC, this year's flu season is mild overall but may be affecting young children more than usual due to an unusual variant of the virus circulating this year. For the first time since 1993, the "type B" flu virus — which is associated with higher pediatric mortality — is the predominant strain.

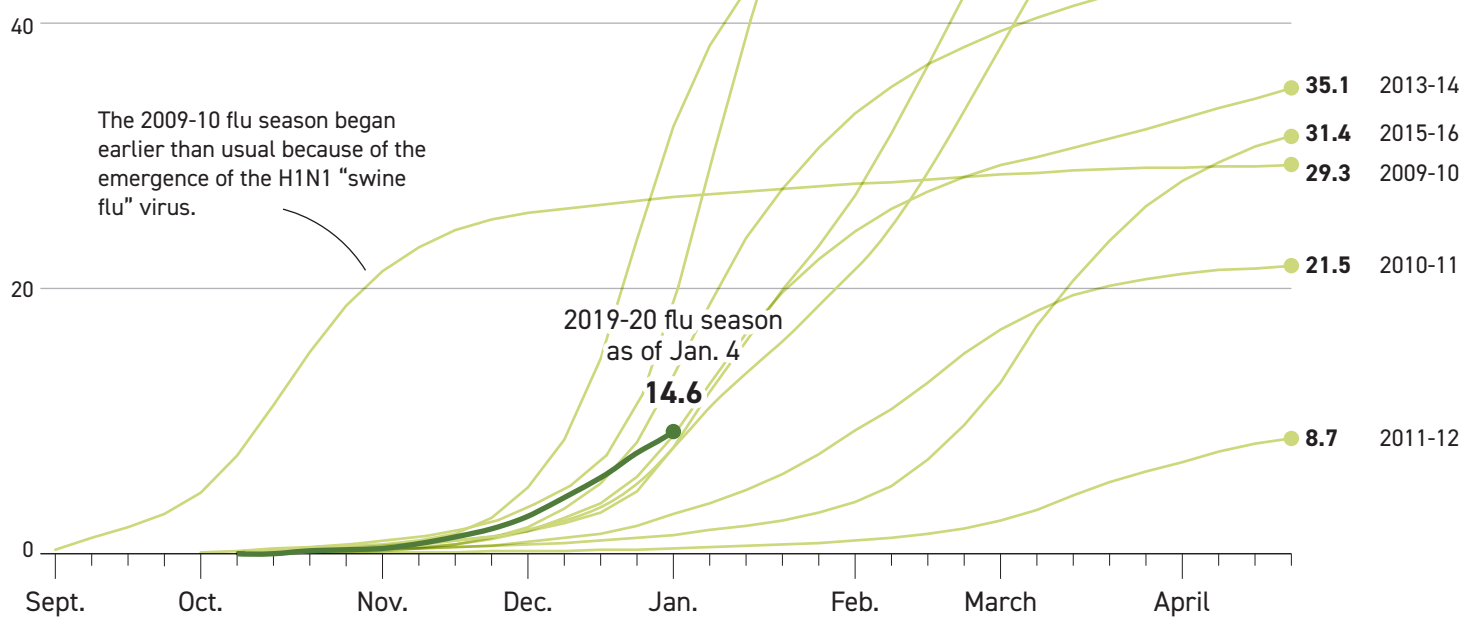
Thus far, CDC estimates that between 4,800 and 12,000 flu-related deaths have occurred since October. This is well below the pace set by the record-breaking 2017-18 flu season, which resulted in an estimated 80,000 deaths.

Researchers say this year's vaccine is 58 percent effective against the predominant strain — an improvement over the last two years. Because the most prevalent flu strain varies from year to year, public health authorities can only make an educated guess to formulate each year's vaccine. In September, President Donald Trump signed an executive order directing HHS to overhaul seasonal flu vaccine production, with an emphasis on faster production methods.

According to a preliminary CDC estimate, 80,000 people died of the flu and related complications during the 2017-18 season, the highest toll in decades.

Cumulative flu hospitalizations by week

Rate per 100,000 population, 2009-19 seasons



The 2009-10 flu season began earlier than usual because of the emergence of the H1N1 "swine flu" virus.

Approximately 80 percent of flu-related deaths occur among patients older than 65 years old, according to CDC. But following a particularly deadly flu season for children in 2004, CDC began separately tracking pediatric flu deaths.

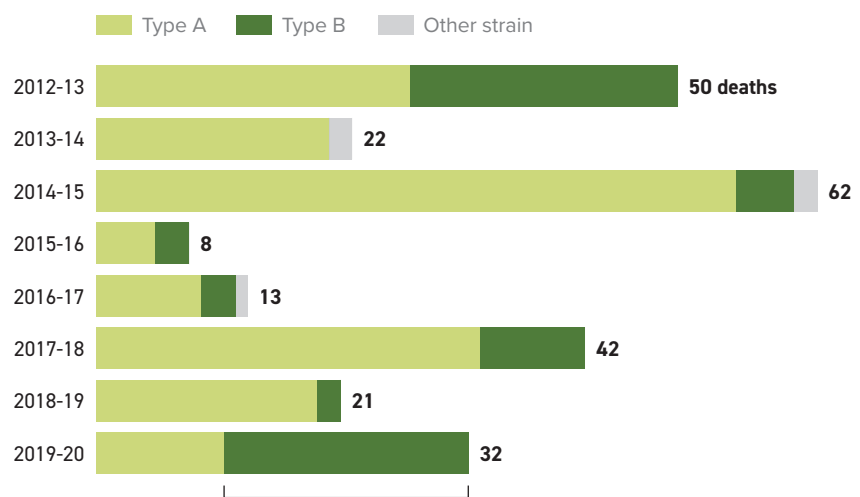
According to CDC's data, the number of pediatric flu-related deaths has increased this year relative to the same period last year, with a majority attributed to the type B strain. While researchers say it is possible the flu season has already peaked, cases could surge again as children return to school from the winter holidays.

CDC recommends that everyone over 6 months old should obtain the vaccine by November, but says vaccinations can still help later in the flu season, even in January or later.

Urgent medical attention should be given to children experiencing seizures, breathing trouble, fevers above 104 degrees Fahrenheit, bluish lips or face, severe muscle or chest pain, ribs pulling in while breathing, dehydration or a lack of alertness while awake, according to CDC.

Less common strain of flu driving uptick in pediatric deaths

Cumulative flu-associated pediatric deaths during initial 14 weeks of season, by strain



More than half of this year's pediatric flu-related deaths are tied to the **Type B strain** — a less common variant that tends to be mild for adults but poses a greater threat for infants.