FluWatch

Public Health Agency of Canada | Agence de la santé publique du Canada

October 18 to 24, 2020 (week 43)

Overall Summary

- Testing for influenza continues at elevated levels; however, influenza activity remains below average for this time of year.
- In week 43, two laboratory detections of influenza were reported and two jurisdictions reported influenza activity.
- During week 43, one outbreak of laboratory-confirmed influenza was reported in a long-term care facility (LTCF). No other influenza or influenza-like-illness (ILI) outbreaks were reported in any other settings.
- 11,638 participants reported to FluWatchers this week and 21 (0.18%) participants reported cough and fever. Provide valuable information to track the flu and COVID-19 across Canada. Sign up to become a FluWatcher!
- Influenza surveillance indicators may be influenced by the COVID-19 pandemic, including changes in healthcare-seeking behaviour, impacts of public health measures and influenza testing capacity. Current data should be interpreted with consideration to this context. See the COVID-19 Epidemiology update for information on COVID-19 cases in Canada.

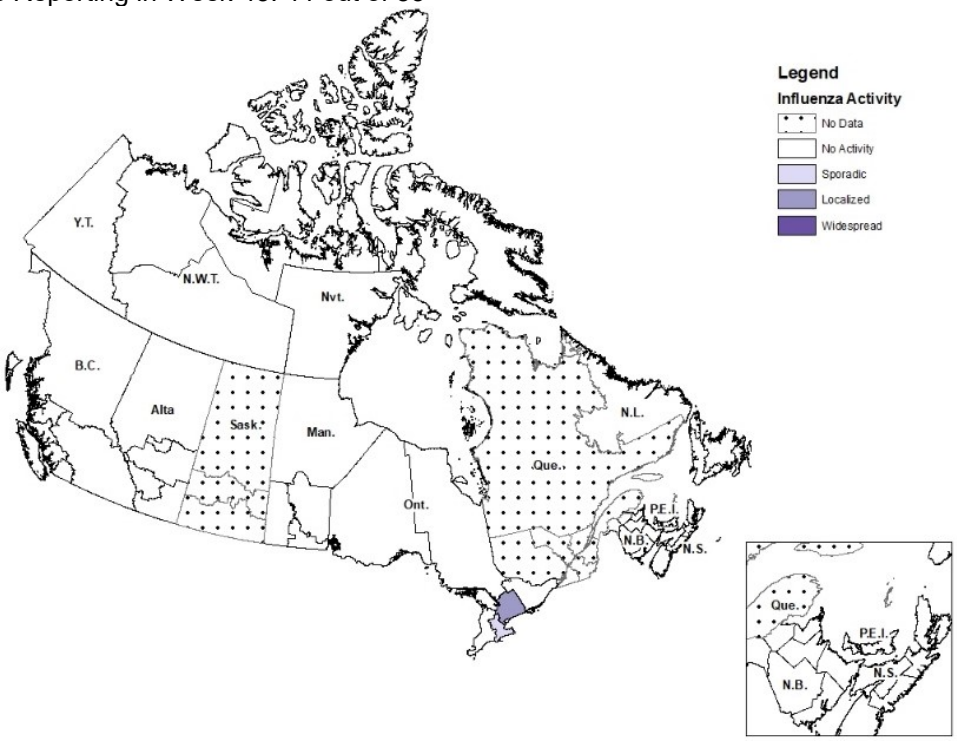
Influenza/Influenza-like Illness (ILI) Activity (geographic spread)

During week 43, one region reported sporadic influenza activity and one region reported localized activity. Other surveillance regions this week reported no data or no influenza/ILI activity (Figure 1). In last week's FluWatch report (week 42), one region in Quebec reported sporadic influenza activity, however the case was deemed false positive on confirmatory testing.

At this point in the season, influenza/ILI activity is lower than the previous four seasons, where approximately 24-29 regions were reporting activity in week 43.

Figure 1 – Map of influenza/ILI activity by province and territory, Canada, week 2020-43

Number of Regions Reporting in Week 43: 44 out of 53



Laboratory-Confirmed Influenza Detections

In week 43, two laboratory detections of influenza were reported (Figure 2). Despite elevated levels of testing, the percentage of laboratory tests positive for influenza has remained at exceptionally low levels throughout the period of March to October. In week 43, 7,715 tests for influenza were performed at reporting laboratories, which is 2.0 times the average for this week over the past six seasons. The percentage of tests positive for influenza in week 43 was 0.02%, compared to 2.8% during the past six seasons.

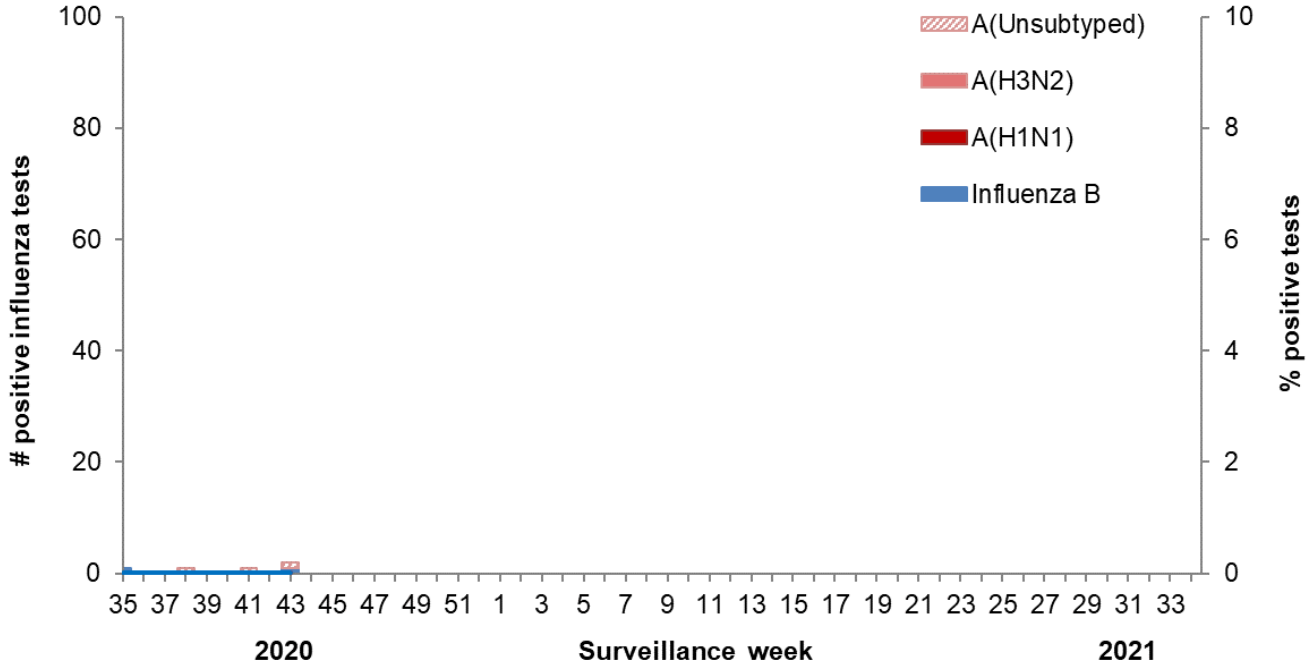
In the FluWatch report for week 42, one laboratory detection of influenza was reported which was later determined to be a false positive on confirmatory testing. To date this season, five influenza detections have been reported, which is significantly lower than the past six seasons wherean average of 434 influenza detections were reported between weeks 35-43.

The 2019-20 influenza season in Canada ended abruptly in mid-March, concurrent with the implementation of public health measures to reduce the spread of COVID-19. Testing for influenza and other respiratory viruses has been influenced by the current COVID-19 pandemic. Changes in laboratory testing practices may affect the comparability of data to previous weeks or previous seasons.

For more detailed weekly and cumulative influenza data, see the text descriptions for Figure 2 or the Respiratory Virus Detections in Canada Report.

Figure 2 – Number of positive influenza tests and percentage of tests positive, by type, subtype and report week, Canada, weeks 2020-35 to 2020-43

Number of laboratories reporting in week 43: 31 out of 35



The shaded area indicates weeks where the positivity rate was at least 5% and a minimum of 15 positive tests were observed, signalling the period of seasonal influenza activity.

Figure 3 – Distribution of positive influenza specimens by type/subtype and province/territory*, Canada, weeks 2020-35 to 2020-43

There is insufficient data for weeks 35-43 to present influenza detections by type/subtype and province/territory

* Specimens from NWT, YT, and Nvt are sent to reference laboratories in other provinces.

Syndromic / Influenza-like Illness Surveillance

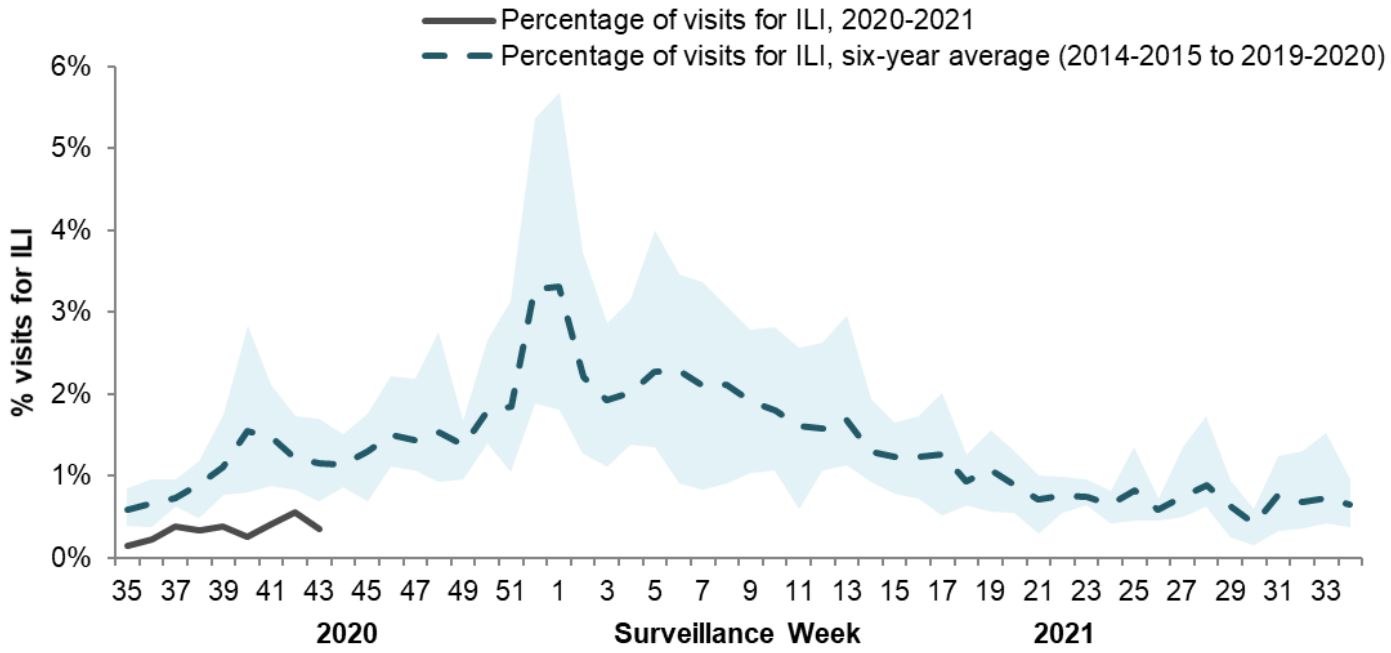
Healthcare Practitioners Sentinel Syndromic Surveillance

In week 43, 0.4% of visits to healthcare professionals were due to influenza-like illness (ILI) which is similar to previous weeks, and remains lower than average compared to recent seasons (Figure 4).

This trend should be interpreted with caution as there have been changes in healthcare seeking behavior of individuals and a smaller number of sentinels reporting in recent weeks compared to previous seasons.

Figure 4 – Percentage of visits for ILI reported by sentinels by report week, Canada, weeks 2020-35 to 2020-43

Number of Sentinels Reporting in Week 43: 67



The shaded area represents the maximum and minimum percentage of visits for ILI reported by week from seasons 2014-2015 to 2019-2020.

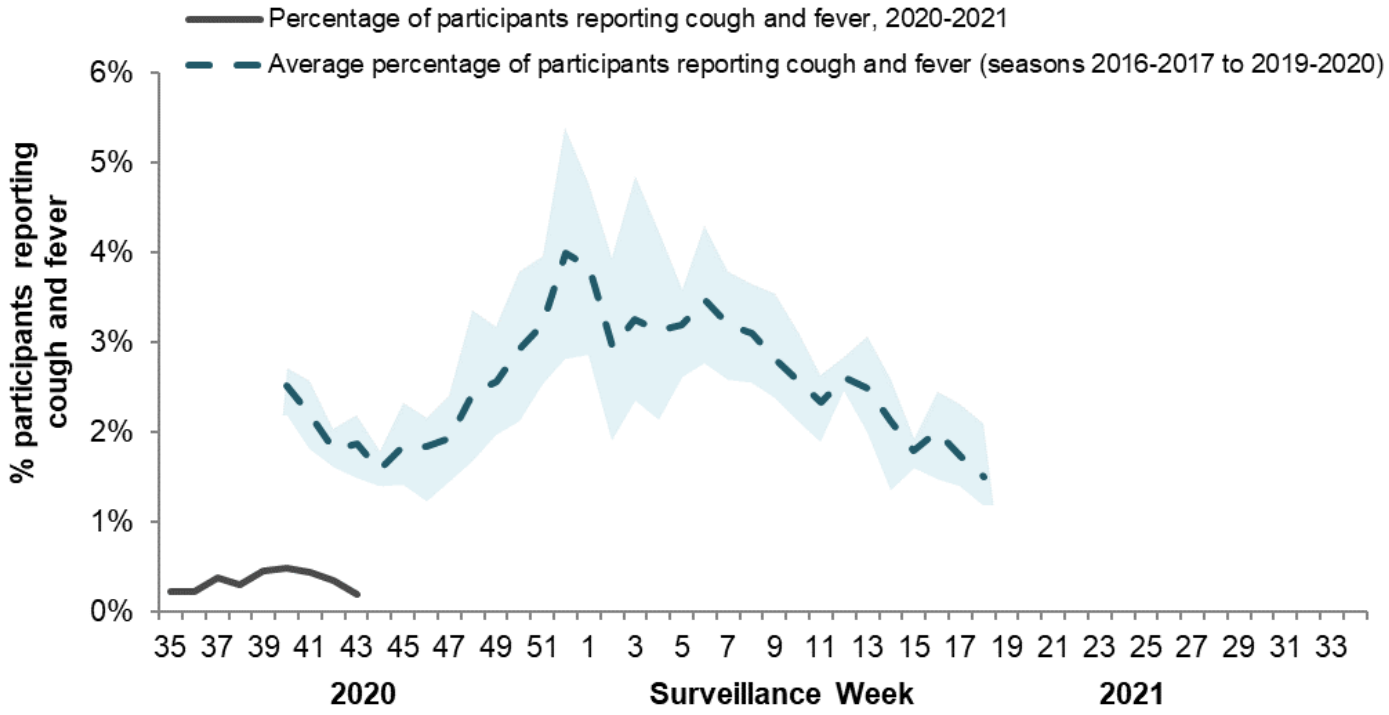
FluWatchers

In week 43, 11,638 participants reported to FluWatchers. A total of 21 participants (0.18%) reported symptoms of cough and fever (Figure 5). The percentage of participants reporting cough and fever is at very low levels and may be a direct effect of individual and public health measures enacted to reduce the spread of COVID-19. FluWatchers reporting is not impacted by changes in health services or health seeking behaviours.

If you are interested in becoming a FluWatcher, sign up today.

Figure 5 – Percentage of FluWatchers participants reporting cough and fever, Canada, weeks 2020-35 to 2020-43

Number of Participants Reporting in Week 43: 11,638



The shaded area represents the maximum and minimum percentage of percentage of participants reporting cough and fever by week, from seasons 2014-2015 to 2019-2020

Online Figure – Geographic distribution of FluWatchers participants reporting cough and fever, Canada, week 2020-43

Click on the map to access the link

Influenza Outbreak Surveillance

In week 43, one outbreak of laboratory-confirmed influenza was reported in a long-term care facility (LTCF). No other influenza or ILI outbreaks were reported in any other settings.

To date this season, 73 influenza-like-illness (ILI) outbreaks in schools and/or daycares, and one laboratory-confirmed influenza outbreak in a LTCF, have been reported.

Outbreaks of ILI in schools and daycares are identified when greater than 10% absenteeism due to ILI are reported in these settings. The number of ILI outbreaks in schools and daycares reported is higher compared to the same time period in the previous two seasons. This is not unexpected given changes to outbreak surveillance, specifically increased vigilance in schools to monitor and report absenteeism due to ILI, and the increased restrictions on attendance for children with symptoms of viral respiratory illness.

Outbreaks of ILI are not specific to any one respiratory pathogen and can be due influenza or other respiratory viruses, including rhinovirus and even COVID-19. Rhinovirus commonly circulates during the fall,and can cause clusters of cases with respiratory illness that could be captured as ILI. For more information on the respiratory viruses currently circulating in Canada, please refer to the Respiratory Virus Detections in Canada Report.

Number of provinces and territories reporting in week 43[1]: 11 out of 13

[1] All Provinces and Territories (PTs) participate in FluWatch's outbreak surveillance system. This outbreak system monitors influenza and ILI outbreaks in long-term care facilities, acute care facilities, schools and daycares, remote and/or isolated communities, and facilities categorized as 'other'. Not all reporting PTs report outbreaks in all these settings. All PTs report laboratory confirmed outbreaks in LTCF. Four PTs (NB, NL, NS and YK) report ILI outbreaks in schools and/or daycares.

Severe Outcomes Influenza Surveillance

Provincial/Territorial Influenza Hospitalizations and Deaths

In week 43, no influenza-associated hospitalizations were reported by participating provinces and territories[1]. To date no influenza-associated hospitalizations were reported by participating provinces and territories.

Number of provinces and territories reporting in week 43: 8 out of 9

[1]Influenza-associated hospitalizations are reported by Alberta, Manitoba, New Brunswick, Newfoundland and Labrador, Northwest Territories, Nova Scotia, Prince Edward Island and Yukon. Only hospitalizations that require intensive medical care are reported by Saskatchewan.

Pediatric Influenza Hospitalizations and Deaths

In week 43, no influenza-associated hospitalizations were reported. Pediatric influenza hospitalizations reported earlier this season were determined to be false positives on confirmatory testing. To date this season, no pediatric (≤16 years of age) hospitalizations with influenza were reported by the Immunization Monitoring Program Active (IMPACT) network.

Adult Influenza Hospitalizations and Deaths

Surveillance of laboratory-confirmed influenza-associated adult (≥16 years of age) hospitalizations by the Canadian Immunization Research Network (CIRN) Serious Outcomes Surveillance (SOS) network has not yet begun for the 2020-21 season.

Influenza Strain Characterizations

Due to the very low influenza circulation to date this season, the National Microbiology Laboratory has not yet received influenza viruses which were collected during the 2020-21 season for strain characterization.

Antiviral Resistance

Due to the very low influenza circulation to date this season, the National Microbiology Laboratory has not yet received influenza viruses which were collected during the 2020-21 season for antiviral resistance testing.

Vaccine Monitoring

Vaccine monitoring refers to activities related to the monitoring of influenza vaccine coverage and effectiveness.

Vaccine Coverage

Influenza vaccine coverage estimates for the 2020-21 season are anticipated to be available in February or March 2021.

Vaccine Effectiveness

Influenza vaccine effectiveness estimates are typically available in February or March of each year; this may be delayed for the 2020-21 season if low influenza circulation continues.

Provincial and International Surveillance Links

- British Columbia – Influenza Surveillance; Vaccine Effectiveness Monitoring
- Alberta – Respiratory Virus Surveillance
- Saskatchewan – Influenza Reports
- Manitoba – Seasonal Influenza Reports
- Ontario – Ontario Respiratory Pathogen Bulletin
- Québec – Système de surveillance de la grippe *(available in French only)*
- New Brunswick – Influenza Surveillance Reports
- Prince Edward Island – Influenza Summary
- Nova Scotia – Respiratory Watch Report
- Newfoundland and Labrador – Surveillance and Disease Reports
- Yukon – Information on Pandemic, Influenza, Seasonal Flu, Avian Flu and H1N1
- Northwest Territories – Influenza/ Flu Information
- Nunavut – Influenza Information
- World Health Organization – FluNet (Global Influenza Surveillance Network)
- Pan American Health Organization – Influenza situation report
- U.S. Centers for Disease Prevention & Control (CDC) - Weekly Influenza Summary Update
- ECDC – Surveillance reports and disease data on seasonal influenza
- United Kingdom – Weekly Influenza Activity Reports
- Hong Kong Centre for Health Protection - Flu Express
- Australia – Influenza Surveillance Report and Activity Updates
- New Zealand – Influenza Weekly Update

Notes

The data in the FluWatch report represent surveillance data available at the time of writing. All data are preliminary and may change as more reports are received.

To learn more about the FluWatch program, see the Overview of influenza monitoring in Canada page.

For more information on the flu, see our Flu (influenza) web page.

We would like to thank all the Fluwatch surveillance partners participating in this year's influenza surveillance program.

This report is available on the Government of Canada Influenza webpage.
Ce rapport est disponible dans les deux langues officielles.