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## CANADA

# She's among the youngest Canadians to get their COVID vaccine. Soon, there could be many more

By **Alex Boyd** Calgary Bureau

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When the injection was over and done with, Gabrielle Hebert, 14, twisted around in her plastic chair to flash her mom a thumbs up, her eyes hinting at a grin hidden by her medical mask.

Last Friday, sitting cross-legged in a former school gym in St. Paul, Alta., Hebert became one of the youngest people in Canada to be vaccinated for [COVID-19](#).

Speaking to the Star by phone more recently, she is clear why she did it: "To help people."

On Wednesday, Canada authorized the Pfizer vaccine for use in those age 12-15, after a U.S. trial of 2,260 adolescents found that none of the vaccinated individuals had ended up with COVID-19, and that side-effects were similar to those found in young adults.

Health Canada's green light is the first move toward vaccination for those younger than 16, an expansion of the inoculation program that will trigger new questions, new anxieties — and new hope — for parents across the country.

"It felt like the world was off my shoulders," says Gabrielle's mother, Nicole Martin, of knowing her daughter was on the way toward being protected. "Literally, I felt my shoulders drop. It was relief."

Although Health Canada has just authorized the vaccine for use in younger populations, the independent committee of experts that gives vaccination advice, the National Advisory Committee on Immunization, had already recommended last month that the dose could be given to teens who were at high risk of contracting the disease.

Alberta, for example, began offering it to kids with chronic conditions last week, and announced Wednesday that everyone age 12-15 would soon be eligible, with booking starting Monday. The prairie province, currently battling the highest COVID-19 rates in Canada, offers one early look at what immunization in younger groups could look like.

Gabrielle, who lives in a little farming community called Mallaig, is a pretty typical 14-year-old, her mom says. "She's 14 going on 25, with an attitude," she said with a laugh.

She loves dance class, hanging out with her older siblings and doing experiments in science class at school. But she also has Down syndrome and celiac disease, which means a COVID-19 diagnosis could be particularly dangerous; so most of what she loves has been put on hold or conducted through a Zoom screen for months.

It's been a lonely year, Martin said. She knows the exact day — Aug. 16 — that Gabrielle last got to see her adult siblings, at a small, socially distanced family wedding.

Still, Gabrielle has stayed mostly positive, her mom said — she's stayed updated on COVID-19 by watching "Uncle Trudeau" on TV — but in recent months her enthusiasm has flagged. "I would say, in the last six months, she was tired of hearing the negative talk," Martin said.

If family started talking about rising cases or the vaccine rollout, "She would just sit down and not talk and lock herself up."

Vaccines have been a particularly bright light for kids with disabilities who have really struggled over the past year, says Shelly Bhayana, whose daughter Sofia Hirani, 11, got a shot in Calgary the same day.

Sofia was diagnosed with a cancerous brain tumour at age 5, and she still has disabilities affecting her speech, balance and mobility. While much of the world took to Zoom, kids who use hearing aids or have speech impediments have struggled with the transition, her mother said. Lack of access to in-person therapy has meant progress on things such as mobility has stalled or even moved backwards.

Kids with disabilities already struggle to feel included in the community; like they're part of the gang at sports or dance or at school, she said. The highlight of her week used to be an exercise class through a group called Kids Cancer Care just for children who'd had the disease. She now attends on Zoom but it's not the same, Bhayana said.

"Sofia, she has no hair, and there's no questions asked, there's just so much acceptance there."

A vaccine is the first step on the road back. First Sofia's father was vaccinated, then her mother, and now Sofia herself. It's like an onion, her mom says, with every layer peeled away a step closer to finding real life again. (In an email passed along by her mom, Sofia said she "can't wait" until she can have a sleepover.)

While kids are less likely to suffer the most serious effects of COVID-19, teenagers with high risk conditions are more vulnerable than their peers, nonetheless, says Dr. Jim Kellner, a professor of pediatrics at the University of Calgary who also sits on the federal COVID-19 immunity task force.

It makes sense to expand the vaccine rollout to younger people, he said.

Even among kids who are not high risk, Kellner said, there are still concerns about so-called long-COVID in children, in which people infected develop long-term complications, as well as the multi-system inflammatory syndrome also affects some kids.

There are also the more long-term reasons to vaccinate younger kids. There is value, he said, in inoculating kids to protect them as they move into adulthood — kids are currently vaccinated for rubella, for example, even though that's mostly to protect pregnant women.

We'll also need a large percentage of kids to be immunized if there is to be any hope of us reaching herd immunity.

"The more people we get vaccinated, the sooner we get them vaccinated, the sooner we're going to get out of this."

While young teenagers will likely be part of the conversation about getting vaccinated, they aren't able to consent to a vaccine all by themselves, which means this will likely be a big decision for parents.

"It's always harder as a parent when you're making a decision for a child, because the last thing you want to do is cause harm. But I think parents make that decision all the time," Bhayana says. "If your child has a condition that requires antibiotics, even taking antibiotics comes with a risk."

Bhayana is herself a physician, but said she consulted with Sofia's doctor to discuss the risks and benefits. In her family's case, she said, the risk to Sofia made the decision easy.

Now, some parents across the country are looking to Alberta's example. Domenic Gentilini with the Down Syndrome Association of Ontario said his group had launched a new online tool to help people with special needs book vaccination appointments and was waiting to hear "within the week" whether they could add teens to that list.

Ontario officials said Monday they're working on plans to vaccinate all of those age 12-15 but have no firm date yet. Health Minister Christine Elliott said vaccines could be administered through schools, with both doses given before the next school year, but did not give a precise timeline.

Many parents are watching closely.

"We have always spoken to our kids at or just above the level where they are, and we don't talk down to them," says Robin Richardson, who lives in Toronto with her family.

Recently topics of conversation in their house have included COVID-19, and Richardson said her husband, a veterinarian, has taken the lead on explaining the science in a way their kids can understand.

They're particularly concerned about getting their youngest son, 11-year-old Bruce, vaccinated. He has celiac disease, which his parents worry could put him at elevated risk.

So he's spent the past year at home, and while his parents have tried to make it interesting — brainstorming fun things to do, ordering takeout and throwing screentime rules "out the window," his mother said — isolation has taken its toll.

But he's been involved in the conversation about taking the vaccine, and has decided he's in favour.

In an email, Bruce, who turns 12 in January, said he's worried about the needle part, but said getting the vaccine would be worth it, especially if it mean getting to hang out with his friends again. He said he hopes they're able to get shots soon, too.

"Today's news is fantastic! I'm really excited that older kids will be able to get the vaccine. I wish it was available for younger kids, too. I can't wait until I'm 12."

His mother questioned if because kids haven't suffered the same serious outcomes as older adults, they've largely been left out of the COVID-19 conversation. Now, there's the push for vaccination.

"This is having an intense impact on these kids, and I don't know what it's going to mean for them long term," she says.

"I know when I was 11, I wasn't having to worry about anything nearly so serious as this. I think it's going to stick with them their whole lives."



**Alex Boyd** is a Calgary-based reporter for the Star. Follow her on Twitter: [@alex\\_n\\_boyd](https://twitter.com/alex_n_boyd)

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