



GENARO MOLINA Los Angeles Times

MADELINE BOUTELLE, from New York, dashes through the rain to do some shopping in Santa Monica.

# FLU IS HERE; BEWARE, PARENTS

Cases rise sharply in the Southland, and doctors fear children will be hit hard.

By RONG-GONG LIN II

Fueled by a new viral strain, flu is hitting California early — and doctors are warning they expect the season may be particularly tough on young children.

Concentrations of flu detected in wastewater have surged in the San Francisco Bay Area, and the test positivity rate is rising in Los Angeles County and Orange County, according to state and county data. Hospitalizations and emergency room visits for flu are also rising in L.A. and Orange counties.

“We are at the point now where we’re starting to see a sharp rise in flu cases. This is a few weeks earlier than we usually experience, but very much akin to what was seen in the Southern Hemisphere’s experience with flu during their winter,” said Dr. Elizabeth Hudson, regional physician director of infectious diseases at Kaiser Permanente Southern California.

At Kaiser, flu cases are primarily being seen in clinics so far, but hospitalizations typically rise after Christmas. “We expect to see the same this year too,” Hudson said.

“The number of cases appears to be higher at an earlier time in the usual flu season than we’ve seen in years past,” she added.

Flu levels are high in San Francisco’s sewage as well as in wastewater across San José, Sunnyvale and Palo Alto, according to WastewaterScan and the Santa Clara County Public Health Department.

One area of concern this winter has been the rise of a relatively new flu subvariant, known as H3N2 Flu A subclade K, which appeared toward the end of summer. That was months after officials decided which strains this fall’s flu vaccine would target.

Subclade K “is causing an active, early flu season, with more cases occurring in some countries within the Northern Hemisphere,” the California Department of Public Health said.

It remains unclear whether subclade K will reduce the efficacy of this year’s flu shot. Data recently released in Britain showed this season’s vaccines were 70% to 75% effective against hospitalization for children from the flu, and 30% to 40% effective in adults, which is

[See Flu, A8]

## Most Americans turning away from year-end giving

By James Pollard and Linley Sanders

NEW YORK — Most Americans aren’t making end-of-year charitable giving plans, according to the results of a new AP-NORC poll, despite the many fundraising appeals made by nonprofits that rely on donation surges in the calendar’s final month to reach budget targets.

The survey, which was conducted in early December by the Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research, found that

about half of U.S. adults say they’ve already made their charitable contributions for 2025. Just 18% say they’ve donated and will donate again before the year is over. Only 6% report they haven’t given yet but will do so by December’s end. The rest, 30%, haven’t donated and don’t plan to.

Everyday donors faced competing priorities this year. President Trump’s social services grant cuts, severe foreign aid rollbacks

and November SNAP benefits freeze — plus natural disasters such as Los Angeles County’s historically destructive wildfires — left no shortage of urgent causes in need of heightened support. Trump’s tax and spending legislation offered an extra incentive to give too; most tax filers will see a new charitable deduction of up to \$1,000 for individuals and \$2,000 for married couples.

But weaker income gains [See Donations, A8]

## Tough 2025 makes Grinch an A-lister

Furry villain is in big demand at costume shops. How did he steal so many hearts?

By Sonja Sharp



CHRISTINA HOUSE Los Angeles Times

NICK DARNELL slips into character. A “monsters” expert sums up the season: “I think there’s just a lot of Grinchy feeling right now.”

It takes a lot for sweet-tempered 28-year-old Nick Darnell to transform himself into Christmas’ most sought-after sourpuss.

There’s colored contacts and facial prosthetics, a protruding belly and at least an hour of makeup. But for the devout Christian and preternaturally cheerful young actor, the real metamorphosis is psychological.

“People today love to connect with the villain,” said the viral Grinch impersonator. “The world is just a darker world now.”

Darnell called the chartreuse bad-die he portrays “the modern-day Santa.”

Dr. Seuss’ holiday parable “How the Grinch Stole Christmas!” has been a seasonal favorite since it was published in 1957, ranking among the most popular and profitable of the author’s iconic rhyming picture books.

The story’s sassy, brassy antihero has likewise adorned Christmas trees and school library shelves for generations. His hornlike fur forelocks and pathological refusal to assimilate have led some critics to call the Grinch ambiguously antisemitic, but those concerns have largely been glossed over by years of nostalgia.

[See Grinch, A14]

## Christmas music came early this year

Spotify users created holiday playlists months ago, and labels had plans before then.

By WENDY LEE

If it began to sound a lot like Christmas earlier than usual this year, it wasn’t your imagination.

Halloween wasn’t even over before Spotify users began curating songs about mistletoe, snow and presents under the tree.

Holiday playlists created on Spo-

tify in the U.S. jumped 60% in October over last year, the Swedish audio company said. Some Spotify users started crafting holiday playlists as early as summer.

“It’s a combination of wanting to feel good and nostalgia, and these are testing times,” said Talia Kraines, editorial lead for pop at Spotify. “Somehow Christmas music brings comfort and I think that’s a real part of it.”

Indeed, eight of the Top 10 songs on Billboard’s Hot 100 chart for the week that ended Saturday were Christmas songs, with the Top 5 being holiday classics, including

Mariah Carey’s 1994 hit “All I Want for Christmas Is You,” Brenda Lee’s 1958 recording of “Rockin’ Around the Christmas Tree” and Wham!’s “Last Christmas,” released in 1984.

On-demand streams for holiday music in the U.S. increased 27% to 8.3 billion this year, compared with a year ago, according to L.A.-based data firm Luminate.

The popularity of music streaming has helped to fuel a surge in users seeking out more holiday music, and earlier in the year.

The change has been driven by [See Music, A12]

## ’Twas the big storm before Christmas

L.A. wasn’t dreaming of a rainy holiday, but that’s what it will get through the weekend.

By RUBEN VIVES, KAREN GARCIA, SANDRA McDONALD AND RONG-GONG LIN II

The most powerful Christmas storm in years slammed into Southern California on Wednesday, closing roads, flooding streets and drenching last-minute holiday shoppers.

The region’s wet Christmas is expected to continue through the weekend, though forecasters said Wednesday was expected to be the more intense day of rain. Southern California’s coastal areas and valleys are forecast to get 4 to 6 inches of rain this week, while some foothills and mountains could receive 10 inches.

Bursts of intense rain flooded freeways, caused some scattered mudslides and prompted a few evacuations across the region Wednesday.

Some of the biggest worries came in areas devastated by the Los Angeles County firestorms in January.

Walking past their neighbors’ homes on Woodland Drive in Sierra Madre, Missy and Jay Chapman said they’d worked for hours Tuesday to prepare their home for flooding.

Decked out in rain gear with umbrellas and their soggy sheepadoodle, Iggy, on Wednesday morning, the

Chapmans, both 57, said they were not concerned for their 1920s-built home, where they’ve lived since 2003.

“We’re always a little worried, but what are you gonna do?” Missy Chapman said, taking cover in her neighbor’s carport.

Her husband diligently cleans every gutter and any sort of debris that could allow rain to pool near their home, she said.

The so-called Pineapple Express was forecast to be the strongest atmospheric river storm to hit Southern California in nearly two years, National Weather Service meteorologist Rose Schoenfeld said. Rain is expected to continue Thursday along with the flood and slide risks. On Friday and Saturday, there will still be a chance for showers, adding to already high rain totals. Dropping temperatures are forecast to bring several inches of snow to Southern California mountains.

The rain brought more challenges for shoppers.

At Del Amo Fashion Center in Torrance, 59-year-old Trini Johnson took a break from shopping with her 14-year-old niece.

Johnson was recovering from a knee injury and would have preferred to stay home in bed sleeping before being forced to work, but her niece needed to do last-minute shopping.

She said getting out of the car in the rain was “horrible” and “awful.”

“I hate wearing jackets,” she said, pointing to her jacket. “See, I’m wearing my [See Storm, A14]

## Zelensky is open to creating a DMZ

By SAMYA KULLAB

KYIV, Ukraine — Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky said he would be willing to withdraw troops from the country’s eastern industrial heartland as part of a plan to end Russia’s war, if Moscow also pulls back and the area becomes a demilitarized zone monitored by international forces.

The proposal offered another potential compromise on control of the Donbas region, which has been a major sticking point in peace negotiations.

Zelensky said the U.S. proposed the creation of a “free economic zone,” which he said should be demilitarized. But it was unclear what that idea would mean for governance or development of the region.

A similar arrangement could be possible for the area around the Zaporizhzhia nuclear power plant, which is currently under Russian control, Zelensky said. He said any peace plan would need to be put to a referendum.

Zelensky spoke to reporters Tuesday to describe an overarching 20-point plan that negotiators from Ukraine and the U.S. hammered out in Florida in recent days, though he said many details are still being discussed.

Russia has given no indication that it will agree to any kind of withdrawal from land it has seized. In fact, Moscow has insisted that Ukraine relinquish the remaining territory it still holds in the Donbas — an ultimatum that Ukraine has rejected. Russia has captured most of Luhansk and about 70% of Donetsk — the two areas that make up the Donbas.

[See Ukraine, A4]

### An audit sought for Epstein files

Justice Department says it may need a “few more weeks” to release all records on the convicted sex offender. **NATION, A5**

### UCLA donor is true to his word

A crucial relationship cultivated what would become a \$1-million donation to the football program. **SPORTS, B10**

### How Hallmark built its empire

A firm rooted in holiday celebrations expands to themed programming and even a Christmas cruise. **BUSINESS, A10**

### Weather

Morning rain. L.A. Basin: 66/54. **B6**



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