



NEWS RELEASE

For Immediate Release
2015JAG0196-001292
Aug. 11, 2015

Ministry of Justice

Statement of the chief coroner

VICTORIA – Chief coroner Lisa Lapointe today issued a public statement regarding recent drug-related deaths, reminding drug users of the risks associated with all illicit drug use.

“The recent publicity surrounding drug-overdose deaths in which fentanyl has been detected in post-mortem analyses gives the BC Coroners Service the opportunity to again remind users that it is not possible to be sure of the contents of any illicit drugs,” said Lapointe. “It is essential that those who use these drugs take all possible steps to minimize their risk.”

“While fentanyl is currently attracting attention as a newer drug of abuse, it’s important to remember that any substance bought from an illicit source poses significant risks for users.”

The statement comes in light of a report issued by the Canadian Centre on Substance Abuse which noted a marked increase in fentanyl-detected deaths across Canada in the past four years.

The BC Coroners Service (BCCS) confirmed that the same pattern has been seen in B.C., with 54 drug overdose deaths in which fentanyl was detected in the five-month period from Jan. 1, 2015, through May 31, 2015. In addition, there have been at least 12 deaths in which fentanyl was detected within the last month (July 7 through Aug. 7, 2015), almost all of them occurring in the Lower Mainland.

Post mortem toxicology testing has shown that in the vast majority of these deaths, fentanyl was part of a multi-drug overdose, most often also involving heroin, cocaine and/or methamphetamines, and often in combination with alcohol and/or prescription medications.

Although fentanyl is most dangerous to persons who have little experience with opiates, Coroners’ investigations have found that a high proportion of those who died of drug overdoses in which fentanyl was detected were in fact regular users of illicit substances.

Chief coroner Lapointe also stressed that despite the rise in fentanyl-detected deaths, close to 3/4 of B.C.’s illicit drug deaths in 2014 showed no fentanyl at all. These deaths most often involved heroin, cocaine or methamphetamine.

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FACTSHEET

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Factsheet

The surest way to avoid an overdose is to refrain from the use of illicit drugs or other drugs bought on the street.

If, however, you do use illicit drugs, there are steps you can take to reduce the risk of overdose. They include:

- Never use alone. Ensure someone is with you who can obtain medical help if needed.
- Inject slowly.
- If you are in the Vancouver area, especially the Downtown Eastside, try to use at InSite where there are medical personnel on site to provide help if needed.
- Do not mix drugs, or mix drugs and alcohol, as this increases the likelihood of an overdose.
- Keep an eye out for your friends. Learn to recognize the signs of an opiate overdose, such as severe sleepiness, heavy snoring, or slow, shallow breathing. If you spot such signs, call 911. This is a medical emergency.
- Learn about naloxone. If you are a regular user of opioids, you may be eligible for a prescription from your doctor for naloxone which can be used as an antidote in the case of an overdose of fentanyl, heroin, or other opiate.

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