



NEWS RELEASE

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Aug. 25, 2020

Ministry of Public Safety and Solicitor General
BC Coroners Service

Toxic supply continues to contribute to loss of lives in B.C.

VICTORIA – The BC Coroners Service has published updated reports on illicit drug toxicity deaths and fentanyl-detected drug deaths to the end of July 2020, with 175 illicit drug toxicity deaths reported in July.

This is the third consecutive month with more than 170 suspected illicit drug deaths reported to the BC Coroners Service.

“The number of people dying in B.C. due to an unsafe drug supply continues to surpass deaths due to homicides, motor vehicle incidents, suicides and COVID-19 combined,” said Lisa Lapointe, chief coroner. “This health emergency continues to take a tragic toll on people from all walks of life and in all communities of the province. Access to key harm reduction services in the midst of a dual health emergency has been a challenge, and the extreme concentration of the illicit fentanyl being trafficked is resulting in deaths within moments of use.

“It is not uncommon for two or three people using together to die suddenly and with no opportunity to seek help. Given the high prevalence of fentanyl detected in all fatal overdoses, if you are using illicit substances – whether it be fentanyl, heroin, cocaine or methamphetamines – it is critical that you use only in the presence of someone willing and able to inject naloxone and call for emergency assistance.

“As the risks for those purchasing from the illicit market are extreme, we continue to encourage clinicians to support those at risk of overdose by prescribing safe supply. We also continue to advocate for an accessible, evidence-based and accountable treatment and recovery system for anyone experiencing problematic substance use who is seeking this medical assistance.”

The illicit drug toxicity death total for July 2020 (175) represents a 136% increase over the number of deaths seen in July 2019 (74). The BC Coroners Service has detected a sustained increase of illicit drug toxicity deaths since March, and the province has now recorded five consecutive months with over 100 illicit drug toxicity deaths.

“What the latest numbers show us is that the overdose crisis has been made worse by the COVID-19 pandemic and the unprecedented tragedy of death and loss to families in our province continues,” said Dr. Bonnie Henry, provincial health officer. “The toxicity of drug supply is extreme, and I implore anyone who may be using drugs to not do it alone. For friends and family members who are concerned about loved ones, reach out and connect with them and let them know they are not alone.”

Once again, post-mortem toxicology testing data published in this report suggest an increase in the number of cases with extreme fentanyl concentrations (exceeding 50 micrograms per litre)

in April, May, June and July 2020 compared with previous months.

“Access to a safer supply remains the number 1, most urgently needed intervention to stop overdoses and stop people from dying,” said Guy Felicella, peer clinical advisor with the Overdose Emergency Response Centre and BC Centre on Substance Use. “Let’s be clear. Nobody chooses to become addicted to drugs and nobody chooses to die of an overdose. We can give people a choice though: to choose between the toxic, poisoned street drug supply that is fuelling these deaths or pharmaceutical alternatives in the form of a safer supply. Making that choice a reality is a matter of life and death.”

There have been 909 illicit drug deaths to date in 2020 in B.C., and the number of deaths in each health authority is at or near the highest monthly totals ever recorded. The number of non-fatal overdose incidents is also increasing, with a record high of more than 2,700 calls reported by BC Emergency Health Services (BCEHS) in July.

“Paramedics are responding to and reviving overdose patients about 80 times a day, every single day in B.C.,” said Jon Deakin, paramedic practice leader with BCEHS. “It’s a lot. It’s the highest number of daily overdoses BCEHS has ever seen.”

Learn More:

Illicit drug overdose death report: <https://www2.gov.bc.ca/assets/gov/birth-adoption-death-marriage-and-divorce/deaths/coroners-service/statistical/illicit-drug.pdf>

Fentanyl-detected death report: <https://www2.gov.bc.ca/assets/gov/birth-adoption-death-marriage-and-divorce/deaths/coroners-service/statistical/fentanyl-detected-overdose.pdf>

Mode of Consumption report: <https://www2.gov.bc.ca/assets/gov/birth-adoption-death-marriage-and-divorce/deaths/coroners-service/statistical/mode-of-consumption.pdf>

Toward the Heart: <http://www.towardtheheart.com>

Stop Overdose BC: <https://www.stopoverdose.gov.bc.ca>

BC Centre on Substance Use: <http://www.bccsu.ca>

Risk mitigation prescribing guidelines in the context of dual public health emergencies: <https://www.bccsu.ca/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/Risk-Mitigation-in-the-Context-of-Dual-Public-Health-Emergencies-v1.5.pdf>

Lifeguard app: <http://www.phsa.ca/about/news-stories/news-releases/2020-news/new-lifeguard-app-launched-to-help-prevent-overdoses>

BC Centre for Disease Control overdose response indicators: <http://www.bccdc.ca/health-professionals/data-reports/overdose-response-indicators>

A backgrounder follows.

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BACKGROUND

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Facts about overdose deaths in B.C.

- From April to July 2020, approximately 13% of cases with fentanyl detected had extreme fentanyl concentrations (exceeding 50 micrograms per litre) as compared to 8% between January 2019 and March 2020.
- A review of completed cases from 2016 to 2019 indicates that the top four detected drugs relevant to illicit drug toxicity deaths were fentanyl (83%), cocaine (50%), methamphetamine/amphetamine (34%) and heroin (15%).
- Between April 2020 and July 2020, more than one-third (35%) of illicit drug toxicity deaths involved people 50 years of age or older, compared to 26% between January 2020 and March 2020. In 2018 and 2019, 31% of decedents were 50 or older.
- In 2020, 85% of illicit drug toxicity deaths occurred inside (56% in private residences and 29% in other residences, including social and supportive housing, single residence occupancies, shelters and hotels and other indoor locations) and 14% occurred outside in vehicles, sidewalks, streets, parks, etc.
- By health authority in 2020, the highest rates were in Vancouver Coastal and Northern health authorities (35 deaths per 100,000 individuals). Overall, the rate in B.C. is 31 deaths per 100,000 individuals in 2020, similar to rates in 2017 and 2018.
- By health services delivery area in 2020, South Vancouver Island, Vancouver and Thompson Cariboo Shuswap have experienced the largest increase in the monthly average of illicit drug toxicity deaths between April and July 2020, compared to the period between January and March 2020.
- By local health area in 2018 to 2020, the highest rates of illicit drug toxicity deaths were in Hope, Lillooet, Vancouver, Grand Forks and Peace River North.
- As reported on July 6 by the First Nations Health Authority, the toll of the illicit drug toxicity crisis on First Nations in B.C. is rising again in 2020, with a 93% increase in deaths among First Nations people in B.C. from January to May of this year, representing 89 deaths of First Nations individuals.
- First Nations people represent 3.4% of the province's population, yet have accounted for 16% of all illicit drug deaths in B.C. from January to May 2020, a rate of more than five times higher than other B.C. residents.
- In May, the Provincial Health Services Authority launched its Lifeguard app to help prevent overdoses. The app is a made-in-B.C. resource to reduce risk for people who use substances.
- In July, paramedics in B.C. responded to the highest number of overdose calls ever recorded since the opioid crisis was officially declared in 2016. Paramedics were called to 2,706 overdose calls in July, or 87 overdose calls a day. The average is usually about 2,000 overdose calls a month. Most were males aged 21 to 40 years old.
- No deaths have been reported at supervised consumption or drug overdose prevention sites.

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