



NEWS RELEASE

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Ministry of Public Safety and Solicitor General
BC Coroners Service

165 British Columbians lost to toxic drug supply in March 2022

VICTORIA – Toxic drugs have claimed the lives of more than 150 British Columbians for the 18th consecutive month, according to the latest preliminary data released by the BC Coroners Service.

“It is encouraging to see a decrease in the number of lives lost in February and March relative to previous months, but we know the illicit drug market continues to present enormous risks to our community members,” said Lisa Lapointe, chief coroner. “We encourage people using substances to exercise great care, use only a small amount first, and make sure someone is nearby to provide emergency aid if necessary. The volatile illicit market remains unreliable and unpredictable, and continues to take the lives of loved ones across the province.”

The 165 deaths in March 2022 represent the second-highest number of lives lost in the calendar month of March, but is 44 fewer than the 209 deaths reported in January 2022. The last time the province experienced a decrease in deaths comparable to those reported in February and March was in September 2021 when 154 deaths were recorded (down from 195 deaths in August). More than 200 deaths caused by toxic illicit drugs were reported in each of the four months that followed.

Expedited toxicological testing continues to provide evidence of the drug supply’s inconsistency and volatility. The detection rate for benzodiazepines, which rapidly increased from 15% of samples in July 2020 to 52% of results in January 2022, were detected in only 32% of tests conducted in March. However, the detection rate of fentanyl and its analogues continues to surge, with 94% of returned samples testing positive in March. Additionally, previously undetected substances such as flualprazolam are being found in increasing numbers of test results.

“Toxic illicit drugs are taking lives and inflicting devastating impacts on people from all walks of life,” Lapointe said. “Along with the obvious tragedy of fatal outcomes, survivors of drug-toxicity emergency events often experience serious long-term health challenges. I am hopeful that implementation of the Death Review Panel’s recommendation to significantly and rapidly expand access to safer supply across the province will begin to diminish the terrible harms people in B.C. are currently experiencing.”

Additional key preliminary findings are below. Data is subject to change as additional toxicology results are received:

- The number of illicit drug toxicity deaths in March 2022 equates to approximately 5.3 deaths per day.
- Male illicit drug toxicity death rates decreased in March, while female rates remained

relatively high.

- Illicit drug toxicity death rates among those 40 to 59 years increased in March.
- The proportion of decedents 50 and older has steadily increased year after year for the past six years. In 2022, 38% of decedents were at least 50 years old.
- Illicit drug rates in all health authorities, except Fraser Health, decreased in March. However, illicit drug toxicity death rates in all health authorities remain elevated.
- Between July 2020 and March 2022, etizolam was found in 40% of illicit drug toxicity deaths that have undergone expedited toxicological testing. Etizolam is a benzodiazepine analogue and non-opioid sedative that does not respond to naloxone and creates life-saving challenges.
- No deaths have been reported at supervised consumption or drug overdose prevention sites.
- There is no indication that prescribed safe supply is contributing to illicit drug deaths.

Learn More:

Illicit drug overdose death report (Data to March 31, 2022):

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

Illicit drug toxicity: Type of drug data report (Data to March 31, 2022):

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

Mode of Consumption Data – Knowledge Update:

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

BCCDC Knowledge update on hydromorphone and illicit drug toxicity deaths:

http://www.bccdc.ca/resource-gallery/Documents/Statistics%20and%20Research/Statistics%20and%20Reports/Overdose/2021.09.15_Knowledge%20Update_Hydromorphone%20and%20drug%20toxicity%20deaths.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>

BC Centre for Disease Control factsheet on etizolam:

<https://towardtheheart.com/assets/uploads/1609802595W XFJ Cm RP6tu1qI04J8t6BzV>

Contact:

Ryan Panton
Manager of Strategic Communications and
Media Relations
BC Coroners Service
236 478-1582

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