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## NEWS RELEASE

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Ministry of Public Safety and Solicitor General  
BC Coroners Service

### **More than 1,000 lives lost to toxic unregulated drugs in first five months of 2023**

VICTORIA – Though the risk of death posed by the unregulated drug supply remains extremely high, the number of deaths in British Columbia due to drug toxicity decreased from near-record levels in April to 176 lives lost in the month of May.

“BC Coroners Service findings confirm that this public-health emergency continues to be driven by illicit fentanyl,” said Lisa Lapointe, chief coroner. “Expedited testing in 2023 is positive for fentanyl in almost nine out of every 10 results, nearly double the positivity rate of methamphetamine and cocaine, the next most commonly identified substances. As long as people are reliant on the profit-driven unregulated market to access the substances they need, their lives are at risk.”

The updated reporting shows that 1,018 British Columbians were lost to unregulated drugs between January and May, a 2.9% increase over the number of deaths reported to the Coroners Service during the same time frame in 2022. The 176 total deaths in May represent a 19% decrease compared to the number of deaths reported in April (218), and equates to about 5.7 lives lost each day.

Unregulated drug toxicity is now the leading cause of death in British Columbia for people aged 10 to 59, accounting for more deaths than homicides, suicides, accidents and natural disease combined. The lives of at least 12,264 British Columbians have been lost to unregulated drugs in the seven years since the public health emergency was first declared in April 2016.

In response to increased interest in the impacts of the ongoing public-health emergency on young people in B.C., the Coroners Service has also released a report focused on unregulated drug toxicity deaths among youth. It found that of the 10,453 toxic drug deaths reported to coroners between Jan. 1, 2017, and Dec. 31, 2022, 142 (1.4%) involved youth under 19 years of age.

Other findings of note from the youth drug toxicity death report include:

- Males accounted for 54% of deaths, and 62% of the deaths occurred among individuals between 17 and 18 years of age.
- More than 70% of the deaths occurred within private residences.
- More than half of the deaths occurred among youth using alone.
- 73% of decedents were in receipt of current or previous services offered through the Ministry of Children and Family Development.
- 67% of decedents had a mental-health diagnosis or anecdotal evidence of a mental-health disorder.
- Fentanyl or its analogues were detected in 78% of all deaths, either alone or in

- combination with other substances.
- Hydromorphone was detected in 12 (8%) deaths.
    - In eight of those deaths, hydromorphone was found in low concentrations.
    - In all 12 deaths, at least one other substance was found that contributed to the death.
  - Unregulated drug toxicity was the leading unnatural cause of death among youth during this period.

“We know that young people are not immune from the extreme dangers of the unregulated drug supply,” Lapointe said. “In responding to this health crisis, it is critically important that we heed the recommendations of experts and ensure a robust system of care that includes increased access to timely, evidence-based treatment and recovery services, and to a safer substance supply as an alternative to the toxic black market. A public-health crisis of this magnitude demands a comprehensive response that meets people where they are and provides the services they need to survive.”

### **Learn More:**

Unregulated drug death report (data to May 31, 2023): <https://app.powerbi.com/view?r=eyJrIjoizTVhNWE2ZWQ0tNjRhYy00YmE1LWE5NTAtOGU3MDg1NDA4OWZiIiwidCI6IjZmZGI1MjAwLTNkMGQ0tNGE4YS1iMDM2LWQzNjg1ZTM1OWFkYyJ9>

Unregulated drug death: Type of drug data report (Data to Jan. 31, 2023): <https://www2.gov.bc.ca/assets/gov/birth-adoption-death-marriage-and-divorce/deaths/coroners-service/statistical/illicit-drug-type.pdf>

Youth Unregulated Drug Toxicity Deaths, 2017-22: [https://www2.gov.bc.ca/assets/gov/birth-adoption-death-marriage-and-divorce/deaths/coroners-service/statistical/youth\\_drug\\_toxicity\\_deaths\\_2017-2022.pdf](https://www2.gov.bc.ca/assets/gov/birth-adoption-death-marriage-and-divorce/deaths/coroners-service/statistical/youth_drug_toxicity_deaths_2017-2022.pdf)

BCCDC Knowledge Update on Opioid Use Disorder Among Youth in BC: [http://www.bccdc.ca/resource-gallery/Documents/Statistics%20and%20Research/Statistics%20and%20Reports/Overdose/2023.06.06\\_OUD\\_youth\\_infographic.pdf](http://www.bccdc.ca/resource-gallery/Documents/Statistics%20and%20Research/Statistics%20and%20Reports/Overdose/2023.06.06_OUD_youth_infographic.pdf)

BC Coroners Service Death Review Panel: A Review of Illicit Drug Toxicity Deaths: [https://www2.gov.bc.ca/assets/gov/birth-adoption-death-marriage-and-divorce/deaths/coroners-service/death-review-panel/review\\_of\\_illicit\\_drug\\_toxicity\\_deaths\\_2022.pdf](https://www2.gov.bc.ca/assets/gov/birth-adoption-death-marriage-and-divorce/deaths/coroners-service/death-review-panel/review_of_illicit_drug_toxicity_deaths_2022.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](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/1609802595WXFJcmRP6tu1qI04J8t6BzV>

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