



NEWS RELEASE

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Ministry of Public Safety and Solicitor General
BC Coroners Service

Illicit drug supply claims lives of 176 British Columbians in April

VICTORIA – Preliminary reporting released by the BC Coroners Service confirms at least 176 British Columbians were lost to toxic illicit drugs in April, bringing the total number of deaths recorded in 2021 to 680.

“Once again, we’re reminded that the scale of this public health emergency is truly unprecedented,” said Lisa Lapointe, chief coroner. “I offer my heartfelt condolences to every family in the province that is experiencing the unimaginable pain of sudden and unexpected loss. Every life lost to toxic drugs in our province is a profound tragedy. Every one of them mattered, and every one of them will be missed.”

The 176 lives lost are a record for the month of April and represent a 43% increase over the number of deaths reported in April 2020. This is the 14th consecutive month in which more than 100 British Columbians have died from suspected illicit drug toxicity and raises the provincial rate of deaths for 2021 to 39.3 per 100,000 residents.

The Fraser and Vancouver Coastal health authorities have accounted for 61% of suspected illicit drug toxicity deaths in British Columbia in 2021. However, the health service delivery areas with the highest rates of death are Vancouver, Northeast, Thompson Cariboo, Northwest and North Vancouver Island, evidence that this crisis has impacted nearly every corner of the province.

The toxicity of the drug supply in B.C. has continued to increase. Fentanyl has been detected in 86% of deaths this year, while carfentanil, a more potent analogue of fentanyl, has been found in 62 samples in 2021, almost as many as were detected in all of 2020 (65). The reporting notes a continued increase in the presence of benzodiazapenes, which were detected in 57% of samples in April, almost four times the amount reported in July 2020 (15%).

“These latest numbers emphasize the toxicity of the illicit drug supply in B.C.,” Lapointe said. “We know that substance use disorder is a complex health issue, and those experiencing it need meaningful and compassionate services and supports. Far too often, we hear from families who have lost a loved one that no help was available despite desperate searches over months or years. It is critical that harm reduction services, including safe supply, are accessible where and when people need them, and that recovery services are evidence-based and accountable.”

Additional key preliminary findings are below. Data are subject to change:

- The number of illicit drug toxicity deaths in April 2021 was about 5.9 deaths per day.
- Males accounted for 79% of deaths in 2021.
- In 2021, 70% of those dying were aged 30 to 59.

- The proportion of deaths of those 50 years of age and older has steadily increased over the past six years. In 2021, 39% of deaths have been 50 years or over.
- No deaths have been reported at supervised consumption or drug overdose prevention sites.

Learn More:

Illicit drug overdose death report (data is current to April 30, 2021):

<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 is current to April 30, 2021):

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

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/1609977106OOyN2HFTIkYYKxfbZi8XL6s1NfTIH0ejSYqQnt.pdf>

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