Counts of Deaths by Causative Substances.

Over the past nine years, deaths involving single heroin/morphine type drug use appear to be declining slightly. On the other hand, deaths where cocaine was the only substance implicated appear to be on the increase, along with deaths from combined narcotics.

Deaths from the combined use of illicit drugs with other drugs (other than narcotics) have risen sharply in 2007 and remain the leading cause of illicit drug overdose since then.

The use of psychostimulants is a relatively new phenomenon. Its place as the direct cause of accidental overdose does not appear to be rising. It is interesting to note that methadone, a substance used in the treatment of heroin addiction, is apparently being used illicitly and causing overdose deaths in and of itself.

In 1993, British Columbia experienced an unprecedented “high water” mark in unintentional drug overdoses. In that year, 470 people died as the result of unintentional poisoning by drugs. Over 300 of these were determined to be the result of illicit drug use. These included heroin and other opiates, methadone, and cocaine, used alone or in various combinations or with a variety of other substances being used illicitly.

This information box provides a code-based analysis of deaths due to accidental illicit drug overdoses in British Columbia since 2000. It is important to note that numbers for 2010 (and to a certain extent previous years) may be revised upwards as final reports from investigating coroners are submitted to the Agency for processing. This analysis includes deaths where unintentional drug overdose was determined to be the “underlying cause of death” (see Glossary for the definition of this term), and where the offending substances included selected “narcotics and psychodysleptics” – heroin, morphine, methadone, and cocaine - and “psychostimulants with abuse potential”, specifically so-called “crystal meth” (methamphetamine hydrochloride) and “ecstasy” (methyleneoxymethamphetamine). “Mixed drug overdoses” included at least one of the above substances, as well as any other drug. A separate total for deaths in which mixed narcotics such as heroin with cocaine were implicated is also included, because multiple narcotic substances are used in combination relatively frequently.