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May 07, 2018

Dear parents and guardians:

As you are likely aware, British Columbia continues to experience an unprecedented illegal drug overdose crisis. Since January 2016, more than 2,500 people in B.C. have lost their lives; including 37 youth aged 10 to 18. While youth in this age bracket are not considered high risk for an overdose death, school-aged youth are not untouched by tragedy, either directly or through family, friends, and media attention to this emergency.

All illegal drug overdose deaths are preventable. We hope that with your help, the youth in your life will receive the information needed to remain safe during year-end celebrations and throughout the summer months.

What you need to know to keep your kids safe

I strongly encourage you to talk about substance use with the youth in your lives. Non-judgmental and supportive conversations about substance use and overdose risks can save lives. Obviously the best way to stay safe is to avoid drugs altogether, but we know that many of our youth will experiment and so it is important to share that:

- The greatest risk for overdose death is using drugs alone – because no one is there to call 9-1-1 or provide emergency first aid support if there is an overdose.
- Opioids are a type of medication that includes heroin, morphine, fentanyl, methadone and codeine. Fentanyl is around 50 to 100 times more toxic than morphine, which makes the risk of accidental overdose from illegal fentanyl very high. Other opioid compounds that are even more toxic, such as carfentanyl, have also been identified in the illegal drug supply. Over 80% of people who died from a suspected drug overdose in BC had fentanyl and other substances like it in their system at the time of death
- A very high percentage of illegal, street opioid drugs like heroin and fake OxyContin contain fentanyl – *but you also should know* that fentanyl is sometimes found in other street drugs that are not sold as opioids, including cocaine. Other street drugs such as ecstasy (MDMA) and methamphetamines may also contain unknown substances. In some instances, these drugs do not contain the drug they are being sold as; the dealer may not know what is in them.
- Anyone who does not regularly use opioid substances is at very high-risk for overdose if substances like fentanyl contaminate their drugs, because they have no tolerance built up for opioids. People who have used drugs containing opioids regularly and then stopped for a time are also at risk of overdose for this reason.
- Contrary to some reports, fentanyl has not been found in marijuana (cannabis).

- You can talk to your older children about making safe decisions in settings where drugs may be available – encourage them to call 9-1-1 if someone overdoses, assure them that due to the Good Samaritan Act, they or others at the party (including the person overdosing) will not face criminal consequences for simple possession by calling for help due to an overdose event.

Talking to teens and young adults about drugs can be challenging, but help and resources are available. Reach out and start the conversation. You are the most important source of information for youth in your lives. Be non-judgmental, respectful, and ask teens what they know. Please take some time to go online and learn more about how to speak honestly with your kids about this important topic.

A resource to support conversations is available at:

<https://www2.gov.bc.ca/gov/content/overdose/talking-to-youth>

What you can do to help save a life

If you have a youth or adult in your life who uses illegal drugs regularly or occasionally – *or you use illegal drugs yourself* – here are some important actions to take:

- Carry a naloxone kit and learn how to recognize and respond to an overdose. Visit www.stopoverdoseBC.ca to find out where you can get a kit and training.
- Be prepared to give rescue breaths in case someone overdoses; giving rescue breaths before help arrives can save a life and prevent brain damage.
- Anyone using drugs should do a small test amount first. Do not mix drugs (including with alcohol).
- Anyone using drugs should do so with someone present who can check on them and call 9-1-1 in case of overdose, or use an overdose prevention site if there is one in the area.
- **Call 9-1-1 in a health emergency** to help save a life – the Good Samaritan law protects people from charges of simple possession in the case of an overdose.
- If you think someone you love may be using, or at risk, begin a **non-judgemental conversation** about how to stay safe. Know that addiction is a chronic health condition and relapses happen.

Help is available

If someone you know is using drugs, there are treatment and support options available. Visit www.stopoverdoseBC.ca or call HealthLink BC at 8-1-1 to speak to a health navigator about treatment options and services in your area.

Each of us can make a difference by starting a dialogue with the youth in our lives. Together we can begin to turn the tide on this crisis happening in our communities.

Sincerely,



Bonnie Henry
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Provincial Health Officer