

WHAT IS **THE OVERDOSE CRISIS**?

Commonly referred to as the “opioid crisis” or “fentanyl crisis” or “overdose epidemic”, the overdose crisis is the public health emergency our province has been experiencing since 2016. Since then, there’s been an alarming rise in the number of deaths due to illicit drug overdoses. Since 2016, over 4,000 people in BC have died due to opioid overdoses. Across Canada, over 11,500 people have died due to opioid-related deaths. The number of overdose related deaths each year has been climbing provincially and nationally since 2016.

WHAT ARE **OPIOIDS**?

Opioids are medications used to treat pain. Some opioids you may have heard of or had prescribed to you include are codeine or morphine. Fentanyl is also a legal and prescribed opioid. An example of an illicit opioid is heroin.



WHAT IS FENTANYL?

Fentanyl is a powerful synthetic opioid that is 50 to 100 times more potent than morphine. It's a legal medication used in health care settings or in slow-release patches for people with chronic and severe pain. Its role in the overdose crisis is that it's being found in street drugs, and is contributing to deaths because of its strength. Approximately 85% of illicit drug overdose deaths in BC have detected fentanyl. A majority of people who are dying due to overdose are dying because of a tainted illicit drug supply.

WHAT IS NALOXONE?

Naloxone is a medication that temporarily reverses the effects of an overdose from opioids (such as heroin, methadone, fentanyl, and morphine). It's available in BC without a prescription and is often given as an injection into the muscle. If you're likely to experience and/or witness an overdose, you can get a Take Home Naloxone kit for free from a pharmacy or visit towardtheheart.com to find another location. While naloxone is an incredible tool for preventing overdose deaths, it is not a solution to the crisis.

WHO IS BEING AFFECTED BY THE OVERDOSE CRISIS?

In short, all of Canada is being impacted by the crisis. Families and communities in every province and territory across the country are being touched by the number of deaths—BC has been hit the hardest, but it is not alone. Most overdose deaths are occurring among males (77%), and among those aged 25-54; but people from all walks of life and different backgrounds are dying.



WHAT DOES **STIGMA** HAVE TO DO WITH SUBSTANCE USE?

Stigma is contributing to the crisis and the number of deaths because it:

- prevents people from getting help,
- creates barriers to accessing important and sometimes life-saving health and social services, and
- pushes people to hide their drug use, with nobody to help or call 911 if they experience an overdose.

For example, people who use drugs regularly report that they are sent away from or ignored by hospitals despite being in medical distress because of their known history with substance use. When that behavior happens repeatedly, it is understandable that people stop accessing health services altogether.

Similarly, when people hear friends and family talk about “junkies” and “addicts” and the judgmental narrative that accompanies it, they may be less willing to reach out to those same people for support if they’re using substances. This further perpetuates the problem as people who use drugs internalize the discrimination and shame, further deepening the distress and isolation. This is how stigma plays out in daily life and is contributing to people not having access to the care they need.



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