



DRUG POLICY AND OVERDOSE PREVENTION AND RESPONSE



Across Canada, far too many people are dying from drug overdoses. This public health emergency can affect anyone, including those using prescription opioids medically or non-medically, as well as people who use drugs purchased on the illegal and unregulated market.

Most recently, deaths from fentanyl — a powerful opioid drug that is produced legally as well as in clandestine labs — have increased dramatically. Within the last six years, deaths involving fentanyl have skyrocketed in Canada's four largest provinces — from a doubling in Quebec to a 20-fold increase in Alberta. Between 2009 and 2014, 655 deaths have been attributed to fentanyl. In many cases, it appears that a high number of individuals thought they were using heroin, oxycodone, cocaine or another substance, and mistakenly took fentanyl.¹

The tragedy is that overdoses can be prevented and need not be fatal if the right measures are taken. These include: increasing access to naloxone, an emergency medication that reverses the effects of opioids; “low threshold” programs such as supervised consumption rooms where medical care is readily available in the event of an overdose; programs to test street drugs that inform consumers of the composition and dosage of drugs they have purchased on the illegal and unregulated market; and legislative changes that encourage people to call 911 during an overdose event and alleviate their fears of being charged with drug offences by police.² An urgent and comprehensive response from all levels of government is needed.

PRIORITIES FOR ACTION

- Help prevent overdose deaths across Canada by:
 - immediately rescheduling naloxone to make it a non-prescription drug and get it into the hands of people who use drugs, their friends and families, emergency services and others who might witness an overdose;
 - providing naloxone in various formulations, such as intranasal, pre-filled syringes, or auto injectors, to make it easier to use; and
 - providing overdose training and naloxone kits on release from federal prisons.
- Pass “Good Samaritan” legislation that gives limited immunity from arrest for those who, in the presence of an overdose, call 911 to get assistance.
- Implement projects to test street drugs to detect toxic contaminants and the presence of fentanyl.
- Develop policies to enable and guide the implementation of harm reduction services such as naloxone distribution and the testing of street drugs.

FACTS AND FIGURES

- Ontario has witnessed 13 years of increasing and record-setting opioid overdose fatalities, which now rank as the third-leading cause of accidental death. More than 5000 Ontarians have died of an opioid overdose since 2000, the vast majority unintentionally.³
- In Alberta, overdose deaths linked to fentanyl have increased more than 24-fold in just a few years, rising from 6 deaths in 2011 to 145 by the end of June 2015.⁴
- British Columbia's Take Home Naloxone Program trained 1318 participants in overdose prevention, distributed 836

naloxone kits through 40 sites in BC and reported 85 overdose reversals in the period between the program's launch-date in August 2012 and March 2014.⁵

- Overdose deaths within a 500-metre vicinity of Insite, Vancouver's supervised injection site, decreased by 35% between the years 2003 and 2011.⁶
- A witness is present at most overdose emergencies. An Ontario study found that a call was made to emergency services in only 46% of such cases; the primary barrier cited was fear of police presence and the potential for criminal charges.⁷

CANADIAN DRUG POLICY COALITION
DRUGPOLICY.CA

CANADIAN HIV/AIDS LEGAL NETWORK
AIDSLAW.CA/DRUGPOLICY

ENDNOTES

¹ Canadian Community Epidemiology Network on Drug Use, "August Bulletin" (Ottawa: Canadian Centre on Substance Abuse, 2015).

² Canadian Drug Policy Coalition, *Opioid Prevention and Response in Canada* (Vancouver: Canadian Drug Policy Coalition, 2013).

³ Municipal Drug Strategy Coordinators Network of Ontario, *Prescription for Life: Summary Report, June 2015* (Ontario: Municipal Drug Strategy Coordinators Network of Ontario, 2015).

⁴ "Alberta slow to react to sharp rise in fentanyl deaths, critics say," CBC News, August 14, 2015.

⁵ Banjo, O., Tzemis, D., Al-Qutub, D., Amlani, A., Kesserling, S., Buxton, J., "A quantitative and qualitative evaluation of the British Columbia Take Home Naloxone program," *Canadian Medical Association Journal* 2014.

⁶ Marshall B., Milloy M-J., Wood E., Montaner J., Kerr, T., "Reduction in overdose mortality after the opening of North America's first medically supervised safer injecting facility: a retrospective population-based study," *The Lancet*, Volume 377, No. 9775, April 18, 2011.

⁷ Follet, K., Piscitelli, A., Munger, F., & Parkinson, M., "Barriers to calling 911 during Overdose Emergencies in a Canadian context," *Critical Social Work* 2014, Volume 15 No. 1.