



NEWS RELEASE

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Ministry of Public Safety and Solicitor General
BC Coroners Service

More than five people a day dying from drug toxicity: BC Coroners Service

VICTORIA – The BC Coroners Service has published updated reports on illicit drug toxicity deaths and fentanyl-detected drug deaths to Oct. 31, 2020, with 162 illicit drug toxicity deaths reported in October.

The latest data equate to five people per day losing their lives to illicit drug overdoses.

“This is the fifth month this year with more than 160 suspected illicit drug deaths reported to the BC Coroners Service and more than double the number of people who died as a result of a toxic drug supply in October 2019,” said Lisa Lapointe, chief coroner.

“We are continuing to see record-breaking numbers of people dying in B.C. due to an unsafe drug supply in our province, and it’s taking a toll on families and communities in this dual health emergency,” Lapointe said. “Challenges during COVID-19, such as access to key harm-reduction services and the toxic drug supply, including the extreme concentration of illicit fentanyl, are resulting in continuing significant and tragic loss of life across the province. Our hearts go out to those grieving the loss of family members, friends and colleagues.

“We encourage clinicians to support those at risk of overdose by prescribing safe supply and reducing the numbers of lives lost to toxic substances. We also continue to advocate for an accessible, evidence-based and accountable treatment and recovery system for anyone experiencing problematic substance use who is seeking this medical assistance.”

The number of people who died from illicit drug toxicity in October 2020 (162) represents a 116% increase over the number of deaths in October 2019 (75). The BC Coroners Service has detected a sustained increase of illicit drug toxicity deaths since March 2020. The province has now recorded eight consecutive months with over 100 illicit drug toxicity deaths.

“The COVID-19 pandemic continues to have a devastating effect on the overdose crisis in B.C.,” said Dr. Bonnie Henry, provincial health officer. “Exacerbating this is the highly toxic drug supply that exists in our communities right now. This latest report shows the tragic impact this crisis is having on British Columbians, and this is a problem for all of us. Now more than ever, we must remove the stigma of drug use and remove the shame people feel, which keeps them from seeking help or telling friends and family.”

Post-mortem toxicology testing data published in this report again suggest an increase in the number of cases with extreme fentanyl concentrations (exceeding 50 micrograms per litre) in April to October 2020, compared with previous months.

There have been 1,386 illicit drug deaths to date in 2020 in British Columbia. The number of deaths in each health authority is at or near the highest monthly total ever recorded. Each one

of these deaths has a significant impact on loved ones, family members and communities.

Quotes:

Leslie McBain, co-founder and chief executive officer, Moms Stop the Harm –

“First, there is the heartbreak that we cannot see in the numbers: 162 lives extinguished, 162 circles of family and friends devastated in just this one month by the grief of losing their loved ones. What makes the deaths by toxic drug poisoning even more difficult to take in is that the deaths are mostly preventable. We must embrace all harm reduction measures, including a safe supply. These deaths are a mother’s worst nightmare.”

Cheyenne Johnson, interim co-executive director, BC Centre on Substance Use –

“Overdoses and overdose deaths are occurring at unprecedented rates, and all of our communities are being impacted by this public health emergency. It is clear what needs to be done to end this ongoing crisis: develop a provincial, evidence-based substance use system of care that supports prevention, recovery, treatment and harm reduction, and recognizes the need to provide a full range of pharmaceutical alternatives to the toxic drug supply. These are the critical and urgent steps needed to end this emergency.”

Learn More:

Illicit drug overdose death report:

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

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