

Update on the Increase in Drug-Related Deaths

July 17, 2020

Over the last nine days, paramedics have attended the **worst cluster of suspected opioid overdose-related calls involving deaths** since we began monitoring this data in 2017. There were **15 suspected opioid overdose-related deaths** between July 9th and 17th.

The suspected opioid overdose-related deaths reported by Toronto Paramedic Services were largely in the downtown and north-west areas of the city. Recent reports from the community indicate there are overdoses involving crack cocaine as well as fentanyl. However, information on what other drugs were present in the drugs consumed in these fatal overdoses is not available. Previous drug checking data show that the unregulated drug supply in Toronto contains unexpected drugs of concern, including benzodiazepines.

Opioid overdose calls to paramedics involving deaths have been consistently higher since March 2020 with a brief decrease in June. Visit toronto.ca/health/overdosestats for more information. The sustained increase in loss of lives highlights the unpredictable nature of the drug supply. In addition, the public health measures needed to prevent spread of COVID-19 continue to create challenges for people who use drugs, and for service providers.

Overdose response tips:

- **Always give naloxone to someone experiencing an overdose (even if you don't know what drugs they took).** Some people may have used more than one drug, or the drug they thought they were taking contained unexpected drugs. Naloxone may not work on other drugs, but will temporarily reverse the effects of any opioids contributing to the overdose.
- **Call 911.** Medical attention is vital, especially with unexpected drugs in the supply. In an overdose situation, the *Good Samaritan Drug Overdose Act* provides some legal protection from drug-related charges related to personal use and simple possession offences. Stay with the person until help arrives.
- **Wear a mask or face covering and medical gloves when helping in an overdose.** This will help reduce the risk of spreading COVID-19.

Overdose prevention advice for people using drugs:

- **Try not to use alone.** Use with someone else and take turns spotting for each other. Stay six feet from your buddy if you are not in the same social circle, or wear a mask or face covering to avoid passing the virus. A buddy system is safer than using alone.
- **Use a supervised consumption service, if possible.** A list of supervised consumption services in Toronto is available at toronto.ca/ConsumptionServices.
- **If you must use alone, have a safety plan.** Get someone to check on you either by phone or in person. Before you use, call the Overdose Prevention Line at **1-888-853-8542**. For their hours and more information, see grenfellministries.org/overdose-prevention-line.
- **Vet your supply.** Ask others about what they are experiencing with the same drug or batch. **Check what's in your drugs at local drug checking services.** The Works, South Riverdale Community Health Centre (KeepSIX and Moss Park) and Parkdale Queen West Community Health Centre (Queen West and Parkdale sites) can check for you.
- **Get naloxone.** Kits are available at The Works, Parkdale-Queen West CHC, Regent Park CHC, South Riverdale CHC, Fred Victor, Eva's Satellite, Sistering, Sherbourne Health Centre, Seaton House, Agincourt Community Services Association, John Howard Society (3313 Lakeshore Blvd West), LAMP CHC, Scarborough Centre for Healthy Communities (2660 Eglinton Avenue East), and other agencies. Free naloxone kits are available at some pharmacies. Find out where at: www.ontario.ca/page/get-naloxone-kits-free or by calling 1-800-565-8603.

