

Recent increase in overdose-related deaths

September 26, 2020

Preliminary data from Toronto Paramedic Services shows that between September 14 and 23, 2020, there were 11 suspected opioid overdose-related deaths. Including these deaths, a total of 19 suspected opioid overdose-related deaths have been reported for the month of September, as of the 25th. This is already higher than the average number of monthly suspected opioid overdose-related deaths reported prior to the COVID-19 pandemic (13 deaths on average from March 2017 to February 2020). The monthly average number of suspected opioid overdose-related deaths during the pandemic (from April to August 2020) is 21.

Preliminary data from the Office of the Chief Coroner for Ontario shows that between September 14 and 20, 2020, there were 17 suspected drug-related deaths (from all drugs, not only opioids) in Toronto. This is a 113% increase compared to the median number of weekly drug-related deaths that occurred in 2019. Overall, preliminary data for Toronto from the Coroner indicates an increase in suspected drug-related deaths in 2020, with a weekly median of 13, compared to 8 in 2019.

An increasingly toxic drug supply, including the presence of carfentanil and benzodiazepines in fentanyl, and the COVID-19 pandemic has worsened the opioid poisoning crisis. We mourn the loss of lives to the long-standing opioid poisoning crisis.

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.
- **Stay 6 feet away if you are not living together or wear a mask or face covering and medical gloves** to 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](tel: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. Visit www.ontario.ca/page/get-naloxone-kits-free or call 1-800-565-8603.

