

Harm Reduction and Hope: Addressing BC's Unprecedented Drug Crisis



In April 2016, the BC Government declared a public health emergency due to an increase in overdoses and deaths from toxic unregulated drugs. Since the state of emergency was announced, the lives of at least 14,000 British Columbians have been lost. In our province, we are currently averaging more than six lives lost per day to accidental overdose and toxic drug poisoning. In this article, we will explore the various harm reduction and informational resources that are available to BC residents, both those who are using substances and those who are concerned for the safety of a loved one.

WHO IS AFFECTED BY THE TOXIC DRUG CRISIS?



The crisis isn't unique to urban centres. Rural communities across BC are impacted at alarming rates. The latest statistics from the Coroner's Service of BC list the Northern Health Authority as having the most deaths per capita from toxic unregulated drugs (67 deaths per 100,000 individuals in 2023).

The crisis isn't only affecting unhoused and precariously housed British Columbians. Over 80% of deaths related to unregulated substances occur inside, with more than half of these occurring in private residences.

In 2023, individuals aged 30-59 accounted for 70% of deaths and 77% were male.

The crisis isn't an IV drug problem alone. Over 60% of deaths are from smoking the drug being used with balance of deaths being primarily split between snorting (nasal insufflation) and injection.

BC Mental Health & Substance Use Services is a provincial government agency that offers information, programs and services for individuals struggling with addiction including Opioid Agonist Treatment. They can support you in finding local treatment and support options in your community.

BC Centre for Disease Control Harm Reduction Services page offers information about addiction, overdose and safer substance use. This page also provides definitions for words and phrases related to overdose and addiction as well as explanations to frequently asked questions and misconceptions related to drug use. Active drug alerts to inform substance users of toxic drugs in their community are delivered via BCCDC Toward the Heart. Individuals living in the Fraser Health, Interior Health, Island Health, Northern Health and Vancouver Coastal Health Authorities can sign up to receive toxic drug alerts for their community here.

For those who are using substances, drug checking is an excellent way to stay informed about what you are taking and minimize risks associated with certain substances. Vancouver Coastal, Interior, Vancouver Island, Northern BC and the Fraser regions all have their own informational pages on overdose prevention, drug testing and the resources available for drug testing within each of these regions. Many sites also offer take-home Fentanyl test kits.

Naloxone kits are free at pharmacies for people who use opioids or who are likely to witness an overdose. You can find a pharmacy that supplies free Naloxone kits [here](#).



SUBSTANCE USE SERVICES OFFERED BY THE REGIONAL HEALTH AUTHORITIES

- You can find a list of Interior Health Mental Health and Substance Use (MHSU) services [here](#).
- For a list of substance use services by community in the Northern Health Authority, [click here](#).
- You can find Island Health resources and area contacts for substance use support [here](#).
- [The First Nations Health Authority](#) provides information on Indigenous harm reduction, opioid agonist therapy, toxic drug crisis data and more.
- If you are located in the Vancouver Coastal region, click [here](#) to find substance use services near you.
- To find mental health and substance use services near you in the Fraser region, [click here](#).

SAFETY IN NUMBERS

When using unregulated substances, it is important to use with a trusted companion who is sober and educated on overdose detection and treatment. Supervised Consumption Locations are also an excellent resource for ensuring that if an overdose were to occur, it can be treated quickly.

You can find a map leading to Supervised Consumption Locations across the province [here](#). If you choose to use substances alone, [LifeguardConnect](#) is an app that provides information on Naloxone, CPR guidance, drug alerts, access to mental health and addiction support services as well as a direct link to emergency services when an accidental overdose occurs. The [Brave App](#) connects people who would otherwise use drugs alone with remote supervision and overdose support while protecting their privacy, anonymity, and autonomy.

[The Canadian Mental Health Association \(CMHA\)](#) offers a variety of mental health and addiction services and resources. You can find local CMHA locations through their website. If you or someone you know is in immediate crisis, consider reaching out to a crisis line for support. You can reach the BC Crisis Line at **1-800-784-2433 (1-800-SUICIDE)**.

[Canada.ca](#) provides resources and information for people who need help with substance use, including overdose prevention resources. They offer links to several national resources including help services, harm reduction and overdose prevention services, and Opioid overdose and naloxone awareness training.

[Alcohol & Drug Information Referral Service \(ADIRS\)](#) provides confidential information and referral services to British Columbians of all ages who are in need of support with any kind of substance use issue. You can contact ADIRS at any time at 1-800-663-1441 (604-660-9382 for those on the lower mainland). Multilingual assistance is always available.

BC HelpStartshere, managed by the Ministry of Mental Health and Addictions, has over 2600 publicly-funded or not-for-profit mental health and substance use supports and informational resources available through their website.

TRAINING OPPORTUNITIES

- **St. John Ambulance** offers free opioid and nasal naloxone training, as well as nasal naloxone kits, to individuals and communities that are struggling to manage opioid poisoning.
- **Canadian Red Cross** offers a free, self-directed online course to become knowledgeable and confident in how to respond to an opioid poisoning emergency, including how to administer nasal naloxone, learn more about opioids and naloxone and how they affect the body and explore ways to reduce the influence of stigma. Upon completion of the course, you can receive a free naloxone kit.
- **The Advanced Coronary Treatment (ACT) Foundation** offers free Opioid Overdose Response Training for high schools across Canada. Training teaches students about opioids, Naloxone, how to recognize and respond to a suspected opioid overdose, and how to administer nasal Naloxone spray.

SUBSTANCE USE RESOURCES FOR YOUTH

- **Freedom Quest Youth Services** offers youth substance use counselling services for youth struggling with substance use and addiction in the Central and West Kootenay regions of BC.
- **Foundry BC** is a network of integrated youth service centers across the province. They provide a wide range of services, including mental health and substance use support, for young people aged 12-24. They offer virtual and in-person information and resources for those struggling with addiction and substance use. They also provide information on **supporting others** who are struggling. Find a Foundry centre near you **here**.
- **Youthspace** is a free online crisis and emotional support chat service for youth under 30 across Canada who are grappling with mental health and substance use concerns. They provide a non-judgemental communication avenue where all conversations are confidential & anonymous.
- Local schools and other organizations often offer youth support services for those struggling with mental health and substance use concerns.
- **Interior Health Youth Substance Use Services** provides a directory of information and resources pertaining to early intervention, safer use, crisis and hospital services, community-based services and facility services.

It is essential to recognize that the toxic drug crisis is ongoing, and continued efforts are crucial to saving lives and improving the well-being of individuals and communities throughout BC. By fostering awareness, accessibility, support and destigmatization, we are working towards a safer and healthier environment for all BC residents. For more rural healthcare information and resources, please visit us at **www.bcruralhealth.org**.

British Columbia Rural Health Network

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