

September 2017

Dear Parents and Guardians,

As you may know, there has been an increase in overdoses in Toronto. More people are coming to hospital emergency departments for help, and more people are dying from drug overdoses, in particular from opioid drugs. Toronto Public Health is very concerned about this issue, and is working hard to find solutions. For more information about what we are doing about this issue, please see the [Toronto Overdose Action Plan](#).

I am reaching out to you today with information about opioid overdoses. While not all youth are at a high level of risk for overdose, this important issue is affecting many individuals and families in our community.

Talking with youth is important:

The best way to keep your children safe is to have open, non-judgmental conversations about issues they are concerned about. Children and youth who have regular, open conversations with parents and caregivers on topics like substance use are more confident and make better decisions. While adults may want youth to avoid using drugs, the reality is that many youth will try them.

What are opioids?

- Opioids are drugs that are usually prescribed by a doctor, but they are also sold in the illegal drug market
- When opioids are taken as prescribed, they help people to manage pain. However, opioids can also cause overdoses
- Prescription opioids may be pills like morphine or codeine, or fentanyl skin patches
- Illegal opioids can include powders or pills that look like prescription drugs. But these drugs can contain anything, including very strong opioids such as fentanyl. Fentanyl has caused many overdose deaths

What causes an overdose?

- An overdose is a poisoning in the body caused by the drugs taken
- An overdose can be caused by:
 - taking alcohol and other drugs within the same few hours
 - taking several different drugs within the same few hours
 - taking a drug that the person's body is not used to
- No one should use drugs alone. The greatest risk for death during an overdose is when there is no one there to help

What does an opioid overdose look like?

- The person won't wake up
- Their breathing is slow or has stopped
- They are snoring or are making gurgling sounds
- Their fingernails and lips are blue or purple
- Their pupils are tiny (pinned) or their eyes are rolled back
- Their body is limp

What can you do as a parent or caregiver?

- Talk to your children about opioids and the risk for overdose (see resources at the end of this letter)
- Make a plan with your child about what they will do if they are at a party or other event where an overdose happens
- Keep your prescription medications in your home away from children and youth by storing them in a safe and secure place such as a locked cabinet
- Take your unused or expired prescription medications to your local pharmacy for safe disposal
- If you have people in your life who you think may be at risk for overdose, get a free naloxone kit and training on how to use it from a participating pharmacy (go to <https://www.ontario.ca/page/get-naloxone-kits-free> to find a location near you)
- Naloxone is a medicine that can reverse an opioid overdose. If it turns out the person was not having an opioid overdose, naloxone will not harm them

What to do if an overdose happens:

- If you think someone has overdosed, call 911 immediately
- If naloxone is available, give it to the person as soon as possible and stay with them until help arrives
- When someone calls 911, the dispatcher can also tell you how to use naloxone until emergency responders arrive
- Some people do not want to call 911 because they fear arrest by police if illegal drugs are involved. Canada now has a Good Samaritan law that protects people from charges of drug possession at an overdose scene

Often people use alcohol or other drugs to cope with other problems. Family and friends can support them by having open, supportive conversations about the stresses and challenges they may be facing. Talking to a teacher, doctor or nurse can also help.

I hope this information is helpful. By working together we can save lives, and support our loved ones struggling with substance use.

Yours truly,



Dr. Eileen de Villa
Medical Officer of Health

Resources:

For information about drug treatment programs:

Drug and Alcohol Helpline

<http://www.drugandalcoholhelpline.ca/>

1-800-565-8603

For information on how to talk with children and youth about substance use:

School Mental Health Assist

<https://smh-assist.ca/blog/new-info-sheet-on-opioid-misuse/>

Centre for Addiction and Mental Health

http://www.camh.ca/en/hospital/health_information/for_parents/Pages/default.aspx

Centre for Addiction and Mental Health resources in multiple languages

http://www.camh.ca/en/hospital/health_information/Pages/information_in_other_languages.aspx

Health Canada

<https://www.canada.ca/en/health-canada/services/substance-abuse/talking-about-drugs.html>

Health Link BC

www.healthlinkbc.ca/substance-use/parenting-articles