

Naloxone: Lifesaving Antidote to Opioid Overdose

In 2021, BC paramedics responded to over 35,500 opioid overdose calls. Canada saw over 6,300 opioid-related deaths in 2020, double the total from 2016. We are in the middle of an opioid epidemic that is affecting our friends, families, and communities. But if we know how to recognize overdose symptoms and understand how important it is to call 911 for paramedic support as soon as possible, we can help. We can also help by knowing how to administer Naloxone.

Opioids are a class of drugs used medically to treat certain types of pain such as cancer pain or for surgical anesthesia. While medically prescribed opioids are regulated and their contents known, illicit opioids have become increasingly more prevalent and far less predictable.

Since 2013, a new class of opioid called synthetic opioids has fueled the ever-growing crisis. This class includes fentanyl, which can be fatal in as little as 2 milligrams. Synthetic opioids like fentanyl have entered the illicit drug supply in unprecedented amounts. In 2021, the Vancouver Island Drug Checking Project found fentanyl evident in 93% of expected opioid samples. Other drugs such as benzodiazepines were also found in more than half of expected opioid samples.

Naloxone is an opioid antagonist, which means that it can temporarily reverse the effects of opioids, such as during an overdose. It is available for free at many BC pharmacies as an intramuscular injection that starts working within minutes. With training, take-home naloxone kits have been shown to be an effective intervention to reduce opioid-related deaths.

So how can you tell when it is appropriate to use naloxone? These are the signs of an opioid overdose: slow breathing or irregular breathing (or none at all), small constricted pupils, unresponsiveness (can't be woken up), cold or clammy skin, blue lips and nails. This happens because opioids lower the amount of oxygen in your brain.

If you suspect an opioid overdose, the most important thing you can do is call 911. The next thing you should do is lift the person's chin, tilt the head back to open the airway and immediately provide two breaths. Continue to provide one breath every 5 seconds until paramedics arrive. If you have a naloxone kit available, administer the naloxone with a needle into the thigh, upper arm, or upper side of the buttock. Continue with rescue breaths and reevaluate for a second dose of naloxone in 3-5 minutes. Naloxone kits contain 3 doses.

Naloxone kits are available at many pharmacies at no cost as part of the BCCDC take-home naloxone program. They are also available at the Mayne Island Health Centre Clinic and the Ambulance Station. With the invaluable help of many in the community, Nicholas Preston, Dr. Juliana Losier and I recently ran a naloxone training session at the Community Centre on Mayne. If you missed that session and are interested in attending another, please email info@mihcboard.ca.

Besides carrying a naloxone kit, there are other ways to help prevent an opioid overdose. These include never using opioids alone, not consuming more than one drug at a time, and having a plan for if things go wrong. Local resources include the Holding Hope support group through Lesley Mussett, drug testing at substance.uvic.ca, and stopoverdose.gov.bc.ca for combating stigma. Our references can be found on the MIHCA website.

And remember, you can do no harm administering Naloxone to someone exhibiting symptoms, even if they don't turn out to be symptoms of an overdose. And the Good Samaritan Act prevails.

Optional Infographic:



References:

- [Vancouver Island Drug Checking 2021 Annual Report.pdf \(uvic.ca\)](#)
- [Naloxone Effectiveness: A Systematic Review - PubMed \(nih.gov\)](#)
- [responding_to_bcs_overdose_opioid_epidemic_progress_update_october_2017.pdf \(gov.bc.ca\)](#)
- [Understanding the Opioid Overdose Epidemic | Opioids | CDC](#)
- [Canada's opioid crisis \(fact sheet\) - Canada.ca](#)
- [Evidence synthesis – The opioid crisis in Canada: a national perspective - Canada.ca](#)
- [B.C. overdose crisis set ambulance call record in 2021 | CTV News](#)
- [Opioids and the opioid crisis – Get the facts - Canada.ca](#)