

COVID-19: Harm Reduction and Overdose Response

We recognize that public health messages shared on COVID-19 are hard to practice when access to the resources needed to follow the recommendations are variable across settings (e.g., when living outside, in an SRO, or in a shelter). People who use drugs and alcohol are continuing incredible work to keep communities safe and reduce the spread of infection. We encourage creative solutions to slow the impact of COVID-19 and protect people who use drugs and alcohol who have underlying health conditions, and/or may be elderly.

Risk of overdose

- COVID-19 is a virus that can cause a respiratory infection and other health problems.
- Benzos, fentanyl and other opioids can slow a person's breathing rate, so COVID-19 may increase the likelihood of overdose death.

Practice safer drug use to decrease transmission

- Remember ways to prevent overdoses: use with someone or let someone know you're using, start low and go slow, split your doses, test your drugs, or use less if you are feeling unwell.
- Avoid sharing supplies, such as cigarettes, joints, pipes, injecting equipment, containers for alcohol, utensils, and other supplies. If you have to share, and if possible/where available, clean and disinfect your pipe or use a new mouthpiece.
- Wear a snugly fitted mask that fully covers your nose and mouth. Pinch the nose band around your nose and extend the mask below the chin.
- Whenever possible, maintain personal space, Reduce close contact (e.g. shaking hands, hugging, kissing) and use barriers for sexual contact (e.g., condoms).
- Whenever possible, clean and disinfect surfaces before preparing drugs. Use soap and water, alcohol wipes, bleach, or hydrogen peroxide. Do not mix cleaning solutions.
- Whenever possible, wash your hands before preparing, handling or using your drugs. Prepare your drugs yourself.
- Cough or sneeze into your elbow or use tissues. Throw tissues away as soon as possible and wash your hands thoroughly.
- Carry naloxone and have an overdose plan.

Get vaccinated

Getting fully vaccinated with all recommended doses is the best way to prevent COVID-19 infection. Register and receive an invitation to book a vaccine appointment:

- Online at gov.bc.ca/getvaccinated, available in 12 languages
- By telephone through a provincial call centre (toll-free) at 1-833-838-2323, available in 140 languages.
- In-person at all Service BC offices. You will need to have a personal health number for this option. Find a Service BC office [here](#).

Learn more about the [COVID-19 vaccine](#).

Access testing for COVID-19

- See the [BCCDC testing page](#) for the latest information.
- Use the [self-assessment tool](#) to determine if you need testing.
- It is especially important for people who develop cold, influenza or COVID-19-like symptoms to be tested if they are:
 - o People living and working in communal settings such as shelters, group homes, assisted living and seniors' residences
 - o People who are homeless or have unstable housing

Buddy up

- Buddy up when you are using. Using with a buddy is safer than using alone. Don't use at the same time so there is always someone able to respond in the event of an overdose.
- Find your "buddies" who can bring you food, harm reduction supplies, medicine, and substances so that you can stay well. You can also be a buddy to those who may need extra support. Check in on your buddies regularly.

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Continue to use OPS, SCS, and supportive housing OPS sites

- Overdose prevention services and supervised consumption sites are open. Use the [site finder](#) to access your local OPS.
- Regular cleaning that already takes place at these sites will help reduce the spread of infection.
- If you are working at an OPS or SCS, review [guidance about responding to an overdose](#).

If you are quarantined or in isolation

- See if your buddy can pick up supplies including naloxone from a harm reduction site.
- Try to have the substances you need to stay well. Know that carrying large amounts may put you at risk by the police and other people looking to score. Consider alternatives to your drug of choice and prepare for potential [drug](#) supply disruptions.
- You may experience involuntary withdrawal if your dealer gets sick. Have backup plans and be cautious and test your drugs when using from different supplies.
- Try to have the medications you need. Re-fills may be available directly through your pharmacist or by phone without having to see your physician. If you are feeling unwell and require medications, call your pharmacy in advance.
- The province of British Columbia with the [BC Centre on Substance Use](#), issued interim guidance titled [Risk Mitigation: in the Context of Dual Public Health Emergencies](#). This was developed for people who use substances to enable physical distancing and self-isolation measures, to reduce and prevent the spread of COVID-19.

Responding to an overdose in the community

When responding to an opioid overdose there is a risk of infection, particularly if rescue breaths are given without protective equipment. This is why each take home naloxone kit and facility overdose response box contains gloves and a CPR face shield for giving rescue breaths during the COVID-19 pandemic. **The risk of infection is low relative to the very high risk of brain injury or death from overdose.**

Taking basic precautions will minimize the likelihood of transmission for both the person who overdoses and the responder.

- Clean hands and put on gloves. If the person experiencing the overdose is confirmed or suspected to have COVID-19, the response should also wear a medical mask and eye protection, if available.
- Stimulate – try to rouse the person, encourage them to take big breaths
- Call 9-1-1 for additional support, especially if the person is unresponsive.
- Administer naloxone – give two doses, if necessary
- Tilt their head back and check for any obstruction. Lift their chin to open the airway.
- Provide rescue breaths to restore oxygen to the brain and check for breathing. Administer additional naloxone as necessary.
 - o Remove mask and use a CPR face shield/breathing barrier to give rescue breaths.
 - o The face shield has a one-way valve and large impermeable area which protects the responder from respiratory secretions.
 - o After responding, dispose of the face shield and additional PPE before taking off gloves.
 - o Wash/clean hands thoroughly and replace mask.
- Anyone not responding to the overdose should leave the room or immediate area
- If chest compressions are needed, leave CPR face shield in place over the person's nose and mouth.

Cleaning

- If you share a washroom with others, clean and disinfect high-touch surfaces, such as knobs, taps, and flushers use commercially available cleaning and disinfectant wipes or products (e.g., soap and water, bleach, hydrogen peroxide, or alcohol-based wipes) regularly (at least twice per day). Do not mix cleaning solutions.
- If you cannot clean and disinfect your hands with soap or hand sanitizer, try to access alcohol-based hand wipes.

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For registered harm reduction and naloxone sites in BC

- BCCDC does not anticipate naloxone and harm reduction supply chain disruptions.
- Registered sites should continue to order supplies as needed weekly/monthly to avoid stock piling.
- Please continue to distribute supplies as usual, and note that if there is a specific request for supplies for an individual who requires quarantine or isolation, additional supplies may be provided for the 14-day period.
- If you are awaiting your next order to arrive and are temporarily low on any supplies, connect to your local Harm Reduction Coordinator. Individuals can also be referred to nearby existing sites by using the [site finder](#).
- Please circulate this information to any secondary or satellite sites of your location.

Continuing essential social services while integrating public health principles to minimize transmission of COVID-19

Shelters, single room occupancy housing, overdose prevention services and supervised consumption sites are exempt from the Provincial Health Officer's orders on events and gatherings because they provide essential services. The greatest health risk to a client in an OPS or SCS is overdose. Creative and flexible service delivery should continue to ensure people have access to these services. All overdose deaths are preventable.

While continuing to provide essential services, it is encouraged your services:

- Encourage and provide access to hand hygiene
- Encourage respiratory etiquette (e.g. cough or sneeze into elbow or sleeve, dispose of tissues properly)
- Clean and disinfect high touch surfaces frequently
- When possible and without limiting access, increase physical space between individuals

For more information

- Site finder: [Accessing your local OPS, harm reduction, and naloxone sites](#)
- [BCCDC COVID-19](#)
- [For people who use substances in the context of COVID-19](#)
- Accessing medications and pharmaceuticals: [BC Pharmacists](#)
- [Organizations implementing pandemic outbreak response plans](#)
- Information for [OAT prescribers and pharmacists](#)
- Housing Information: [BC Housing](#)
- [COVID-19 and responding to an opioid overdose in OPS and SCS](#)
- [Safer drinking tips for COVID-19](#)
- [Information for People Who Use Drugs or Alcohol and are at Risk of Withdrawal, Overdose and Other Harms](#)
- [BCCDC Cleaning and Disinfecting](#)