

# Communicating Drug Alerts

## *Tips for Informing People Who Use Drugs About Adverse Drug Events*

Care must be taken when advising populations using substances about the dangers of adulterants or changes in potency of street drugs. The following recommendations stem from an analysis of focus group discussions with 32 people who use drugs (peers) and interviews with 5 health service providers within the Vancouver Coastal Health region.

People who use drugs reported trusting their dealer to provide drugs that were not adulterated and relying on each other to get information about potential issues with street drugs.

### General Recommendations

- **Timeliness:** respond in a timely manner so that people have time to react before the batch of bad drugs affects too many people.
- **Modes of Communication:** A multi-faceted approach is desirable – use as many ways as possible to get the information out as peers rely on word-of-mouth communication the most
  - To local community-based and peer organizations.
  - To health and other service providers that interact with peers.
  - Posters or flyers on the street, in agencies, etc.
  - Online sources – social media sites such as Facebook and web news.
  - Free newspapers – Metro, 24 hours, and other local free newspapers.
- **Frequency:** send out as many warnings as necessary. However, make sure warnings are taken down in a timely manner so that people know when a new issue rises.

### Recommended Content

- Advisories should avoid terms that might, indirectly, attract users, such as “potent,” “strong”, or “more powerful.” Such terms could inadvertently result in an increase in people seeking out the drug. Better alternatives are “more toxic,” “lethal” and “deadly” - terms that imply harm.
- Provide details about the signs and symptoms of the overdose or negative reaction so people know what to look out for. For example: sleepiness, becoming unconscious, trouble breathing (may sound like labored snoring), slow shallow breathing, cold clammy skin, not responding to pain.
- If possible, provide the name and a description of the substance that may be causing harm.
- Put a date of release on the poster so that people know it is a recent concern, not an ongoing issue.
- Make sure the poster is taken down when the issue is over. If needed, include the date when the poster should be taken off (~1 week).
- Have a standard eye-catching format so warning messages are easily recognized.
- Include specific calls to action to reduce harms. Some examples of key harm reduction messages include:
  - Get overdose prevention, recognition, and response training; carry naloxone
  - Make a plan and have/tell a sober buddy who can call for help if needed
  - Know your tolerance. If you are sick or had a time of abstinence or reduced use, use much less
  - Don't mix drugs or mix drugs with alcohol
  - Test a small amount first and go slow
  - Use in a supervised site if possible (InSite in Vancouver)
  - Call 911 right away if someone ODs
  - Administer naloxone if someone ODs (it will not cause harm, and if the overdose is due to a mixture of substances, naloxone will take any opioid out of the picture)

A sample poster is available on the next page.  
Access the full CDA research report at this [\[link\]](#).

Last Updated: July 4, 2016



# IMPORTANT COMMUNITY WARNING

## HEROIN SOLD IN BLUE FLAPS IS CAUSING BLACKOUTS

- Drug looks like beige/brown heroin & is sold in blue flaps
- 5 people have been taken to hospital emergency
- All 5 reported feeling dizzy within 10 minutes of injecting
- All experienced blackouts that lasted from 1 – 5 hours

### FOR YOUR SAFETY:

- 1) Avoid using this drug
- 2) If using, use InSite or tell a sober buddy who can call for help
- 3) Test by injecting a small amount first, then go slow
- 4) Do not use with alcohol or other drugs
- 5) Call 911 immediately if something doesn't feel right
- 6) Give naloxone if someone has decreased breathing

For more info, please contact:

\_\_\_\_\_ (Name of Agency)  
\_\_\_\_\_ (Phone Number)



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