
INFORMATION BULLETIN

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Ministry of Healthy Living and Sport
Office of the Provincial Health Officer

PUBLIC HEALTH ADVISORY – TAINTED COCAINE

VICTORIA – Public health officials are warning physicians, social service agencies and cocaine users of reports they have received of people becoming seriously ill from using contaminated cocaine, beyond the already known detrimental effects of cocaine.

At least 10 people on Vancouver Island and the Lower Mainland have required medical attention for a serious, unusual condition over the past several months after using powdered cocaine, with the most recent incident reported this month.

The patients suffered from bone marrow suppression and an abnormally low number of a type of white blood cell, which serves as the main defence against infections. Such severe suppression of the immune system can result in minor infections becoming fatal if not treated quickly. Severe immune suppression can occur in people taking cocaine contaminated with levamisole, an antibiotic used to treat worm infestations in animals.

Health officials are concerned tainted cocaine is an ongoing risk that could affect people in other parts of the province as well. Cocaine contaminated with levamisole has also recently been found in Alberta, where five people since July have fallen ill with severe immune suppression. Similar incidents have also been reported from the United States and Europe. The cocaine was likely diluted, or “cut,” to increase the volume of the cocaine for greater profits.

Public Health officials are working closely with the BC Centre for Disease Control to gather more information about this situation.

People who use cocaine and experience one or more of the following should see a doctor or street nurse and inform them of their cocaine use:

- persistent or recurrent fever and chills
- worsening swollen glands
- painful sores in the mouth or around the anus
- frequent, persistent or worsening skin infections
- pneumonia
- worsening or persistent sore throat
- thrush – a white coating of the mouth, tongue, or throat
- other unusual infections

Doctors are being alerted to this condition and being requested to inform their local medical health officer if they diagnose patients with this condition who use cocaine.

The province's doctors, health professionals and regional health authorities provide numerous programs and supports to assist with substance use and addictions.

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