

Substances in the Unregulated Drug Supply

Harm Reduction Manual

Updated: April 29, 2026



First Nations Health Authority
Health through wellness



BC Centre for Disease Control
Provincial Health Services Authority

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Introduction

This section provides information on common substances in the [unregulated drug supply](#) and how these substances work in the body. This section also explains how these substances can affect health, including poisoning, withdrawal, and substance use disorder.

This section also includes links to infographics that explain new, or novel, substances in the unregulated drug supply.

Background

In Canada, the [Controlled Drugs and Substances Act](#) (CDSA) regulates the production, possession, distribution, and use of [controlled substances](#).¹

The unregulated drug supply refers to the many unregulated substances that are made, sold, and used outside of the legal and regulatory system. [Unregulated substances](#) are highly variable and unpredictable because no one checks their quality and safety. They often contain harmful, [toxic](#), and [potent](#) substances that greatly increase the risks of drug poisoning and other health harms.^{2,3}

Resources

- Visit the [BC Centre on Substance Use \(BCCSU\) Drug Checking in BC Dashboard](#) for information on substances in the unregulated drug supply and drug checking results in BC.
- Find drug checking locations on the [BCCSU Find Drug Checking website](#).
- Sign up for [Toxic Drug and Health Alerts](#) in your region by texting JOIN to 253787 (ALERTS).

Opioids

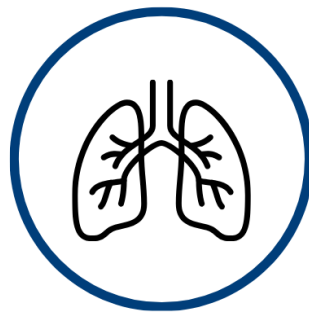
Opioids are a type of [psychoactive](#) substance that slow down the brain and body through the [central nervous system](#).⁴ Because of this, opioids are often called “down”. Opioids work by attaching to receptors throughout the body and slowing things down, like thinking, movement, and breathing.

Opioids can be prescribed as medication to manage moderate to severe pain or to ease the symptoms of [opioid withdrawal](#). Common prescribed opioids include morphine, hydromorphone, and methadone. People may also use opioids to create feelings of [euphoria](#) or relaxation, to cope with emotional or physical pain, or to cause drowsiness.⁵

Opioids can...



Slow down the central nervous system



Slow or stop breathing



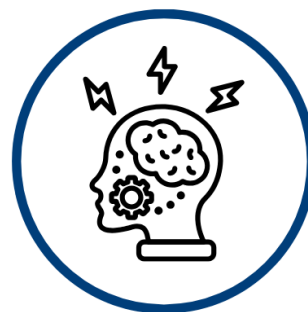
Be prescribed for moderate to severe pain



Cause opioid poisoning in toxic amounts



Be prescribed, or be accessed through the unregulated drug supply



Cause physical opioid tolerance and withdrawal

Opioids in the Unregulated Drug Supply

Some opioids are usually or only made in regulated facilities. Some types of opioids are only produced in the unregulated drug supply. Others (like fentanyl) are available from the unregulated and regulated drug supply. Regulated fentanyl is prescribed by doctors in clinics and hospitals. Unregulated fentanyl is made illegally without quality and safety controls. The high rates of drug poisoning deaths are largely because of unregulated fentanyl in the drug supply.

Drug checking shows that unregulated opioids can often be a mix of unknown or harmful substances.⁶ For example, some opioid samples contain sedatives that make people drowsy and less alert.⁶ Other opioid samples contain different types of fentanyl that are chemically similar but can be much more potent, like carfentanil.⁷

Health Impacts of Opioid Use

Using opioids can have several serious and unexpected side effects and adverse health effects, including [opioid poisoning](#). Using opioids over a long period of time can lead to a person developing a [tolerance](#) to opioids, meaning the body needs stronger doses more often to feel the same effects. Using higher doses more often can lead people to develop physical [opioid dependence](#). This means that when a person with opioid dependences does not get a regular amount of opioids, their body experiences painful symptoms of [opioid withdrawal](#).

Some people who use opioids develop [opioid use disorder](#).⁴ This is when a person's opioid use becomes a problem and interferes with daily life. Some people use more than one substance (such as opioids, stimulants, and alcohol) in ways that cause problems for the person. This is called a [polysubstance use](#) disorder. Like other substance use disorders, this is a medical condition that can be treated with medications and other therapies.

Opioid Poisoning

An opioid poisoning happens when a toxic amount of opioids overwhelms the body's ability to function, causing breathing to slow, stop, or become abnormal. Brain injury and death can occur when the brain and body do not get enough oxygen.

Opioid poisoning can look different from person to person and from one situation to the next. Most people will present with the 3 key signs of opioid poisoning: slow, stopped, or abnormal breathing (like gurgling, snoring, or choking), decreased level of consciousness, and pinpoint pupils. Other signs include blue or grey/ashen lips and nails, cold and clammy skin, and a stiff neck, chest, or body.

Key Signs of Opioid Poisoning



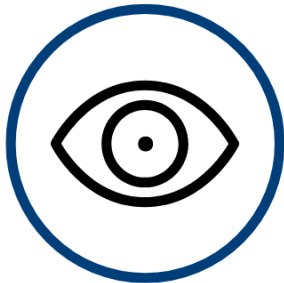
1. Having Trouble Breathing

- Taking less than 12 breaths per minute, or
- Taking slow, irregular, or shallow breaths, or
- Making unusual sounds such as choking, gurgling, snoring, wheezing, or gasping, or
- Not breathing at all.



2. Not responding

- Being very drowsy, sedated, low energy, or confused, or
- Not responding to voices or painful touch



3. Very small (pinpoint) or constricted pupils

Opioid poisoning is a medical emergency that needs immediate response with rescue breaths and naloxone. An unmanaged opioid poisoning can cause serious injury and death.

See [Section 10](#) - Opioid Poisoning Response for more information on how to recognize and respond to opioid poisoning.

Opioid Withdrawal

When someone with a physical opioid dependence cuts back or stops using opioids, they can experience opioid withdrawal. Opioid withdrawal involves intense and painful physical symptoms, including nausea, vomiting, diarrhea, stomach cramps, sweating, anxiety, and restlessness. These symptoms can start within hours after a person last used opioids, depending on the person and their substance use history and patterns.

Opioid Use Disorder

Opioid use disorder (OUD) happens when a person develops a problematic pattern of opioid use that significantly interferes with functioning. Not everyone who uses opioids will develop OUD. Research demonstrates that people with opioid use disorder benefit when offered screening, assessment, and treatment, including withdrawal management, social supports, and treatment with opioid agonist treatment (OAT).²³

Stimulants

Stimulants are a type of [psychoactive](#) substance that increase the activity of the [central nervous system](#). They increase blood pressure, heart rate, energy, and focus. Stimulants work by increasing the activity of some chemicals in the brain, called [neurotransmitters](#). This increases many physical and mental functions, including feeling more alert. Some people say this feels like the body is speeding up its “fight or flight” response.¹⁰

Stimulants can be prescribed as medication to treat several conditions, including attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) and narcolepsy. Common prescribed stimulants include methylphenidate (e.g., Ritalin) and amphetamines (e.g., Adderall).

Stimulants can...



Speed up the central nervous system



Cause higher heart rate, blood pressure, sweating, and faster breathing



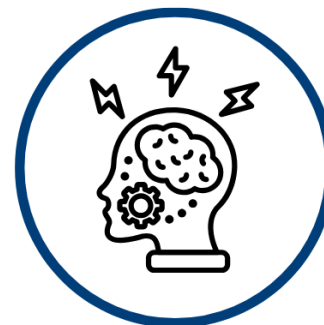
Be prescribed for conditions like ADHD or narcolepsy



Cause stimulant toxicity in toxic amounts



Be prescribed or accessed through the unregulated drug supply



Cause stimulant withdrawal

Stimulants in the Unregulated Drug Supply

Some stimulants come from the unregulated drug supply. Common unregulated stimulants include cocaine, crack cocaine, and crystal methamphetamine. People use unregulated stimulants for many reasons, such as to feel euphoria or more confident, to curb hunger, or to stay alert. This is especially common for people who are unhoused who need to protect themselves and their belongings.^{11,12}

Drug checking results show that unregulated stimulants often contain unknown or dangerous substances. In some cases, substances that people think are stimulants contain other substances, like opioids or benzodiazepines.⁶ When a person takes a depressant and a stimulant at the same time, their effects can clash, like trying to speed up and slow down the heart rate at the same time. These mixed signals can be dangerous for the body. One substance can also mask or cover the effects of the other, leading people to use more and increase the risk of a drug poisoning.¹³ If opioids are unknowingly mixed with stimulants, someone who does not typically use opioids and has no tolerance for them can experience an opioid poisoning.

Health Impacts from Stimulant Use

Stimulants can have many effects on the body, which depend on the person and factors like their body weight, the type of stimulant they use, how much they use, their tolerance, if they used other substances, and if they had an empty stomach.⁹ These include serious and unexpected effects like experiencing [stimulant toxicity](#) (also known as overamping), [stimulant withdrawal](#), or [stimulant-induced psychosis](#), [stimulant-related seizure](#) and/or developing a [stimulant use disorder](#).¹⁴ Stimulant toxicity happens when a toxic amount of stimulants overwhelms the body's functioning. See [Section 11](#) - Stimulant Toxicity for more information on how to respond.

Signs of Stimulant Toxicity



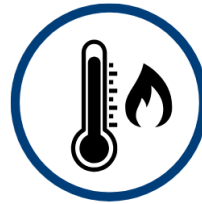
Rigid, jerking limbs or seizure



Chest pain or severe headache



Unconscious or in-and-out



Skin feels very hot



Anxiety, paranoia, confusion, agitation, or hallucinations

Like an opioid use disorder, stimulant use disorder develops when stimulant use becomes a problem and interferes with daily living.

Hallucinogens & Combined Substances

Hallucinogens are psychedelic substances that can change how people experience the world. They can affect sight, hearing, taste, smell, thinking, and feeling. They can affect mood and may cause a person to [hallucinate](#) (see or hear things that are not there) especially when taken in high doses. People use hallucinogens in different ways. Some people take a full dose at one time, while others may take small amounts regularly (called microdosing).²²

Hallucinogens and combined substances can...



Change perception of sight, hearing, taste, feeling and smell



Contain unknown substances or none of the expected substance



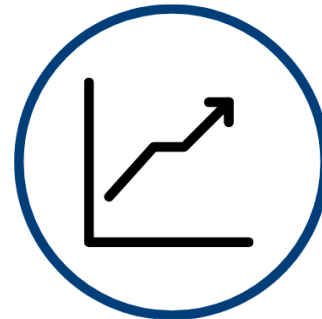
Cause drug poisoning, depending what is in the substance



Be accessed through the unregulated drug supply



Sometimes be approved for use in clinical trials or for specific medical or scientific purposes



Cause you to develop tolerance with frequent use

Common hallucinogens include:

- Lysergic acid diethylamide (LSD, acid),
- Psilocybin (magic mushrooms),
- Mescaline,
- Dimethyltryptamine (DMT),
- Ayahuasca,
- Phencyclidine (PCP),
- 3,4-methylenedioxymethamphetamine (MDMA, ecstasy), and
- Salvia.

Combined Substances

Some substances, like MDMA, can have the effects of both a stimulant and a hallucinogen. These substances are referred to as a combined substance.¹⁵

In Canada, many hallucinogens are controlled substances.¹ This means they are not legal. In some situations, hallucinogens can be used in clinical trials and for specific medical or research purposes.^{16,17}

Health Effects of Hallucinogen Use

It is difficult to understand all the risks of using hallucinogens because there are many types and different ways people use them.²⁰ Hallucinogen use can cause several serious and unexpected effects, including experiencing toxicity (depending on the type and amount of substance taken), developing a [hallucinogen use disorder](#), and developing mental health issues, including self harm, anxiety, agitation, confusion, and psychosis.^{18,19,20} Since hallucinogens are part of the unregulated drug supply, they can contain harmful or unknown substances. For example, substances sold as MDMA may contain methamphetamine.

Using hallucinogens often can lead to developing a tolerance. Like other substances, taking a break from using hallucinogens can lower a person's tolerance. Stopping use of hallucinogens does not typically cause physical withdrawal symptoms. However, people can develop psychological dependence on hallucinogens, where they experience cravings and difficulty functioning without the substance.¹⁵

Levamisole Information Sheet for the Public

Information Sheet for the Public: Levamisole (Pig de-wormer)

What is Levamisole?
 Levamisole is used for a wide range of parasitic infections in a dog, cat, horse, pig, rabbit, ferret, and other animals. It is used to treat the intestines and other parts of the digestive system, including the lungs and other structures. Levamisole is a broad-spectrum anthelmintic, which means it can kill a wide range of parasites, including roundworms, tapeworms, and lungworms.

Contaminated crack and cocaine can cause severe infections and skin colour changes in some people
 Levamisole is used to treat a wide range of parasitic infections in animals. It is also used to treat a severe infection in some people, known as **leishmaniasis**. This infection is caused by a parasite that is spread by sandflies. It can cause skin lesions, fever, and other symptoms. Levamisole is used to treat this infection in some people.

How can I tell if I may have used contaminated crack or cocaine?
 Levamisole is used to treat a wide range of parasitic infections in animals. It is also used to treat a severe infection in some people, known as **leishmaniasis**. This infection is caused by a parasite that is spread by sandflies. It can cause skin lesions, fever, and other symptoms. Levamisole is used to treat this infection in some people.

What are the side effects of Levamisole?
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For drug checking services in BC
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Levamisole Information Sheet for Healthcare Providers

Levamisole
 Information Sheet for Healthcare Providers in British Columbia

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What is the link with cocaine?
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How often is levamisole detected in cocaine?
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Levamisole Toxicity: Typical presentation and findings

Respiratory system	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pulmonary edema, fever, chest pain, and hypoxia • Acute respiratory distress syndrome (ARDS) or acute respiratory failure • Cough and sputum production
Cardiovascular	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hypotension, tachycardia, and arrhythmias • Myocardial infarction • Myocarditis
Other systems	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hemolytic anemia • Thrombocytopenia • Leukopenia • Nephritis • Hepatitis • Pancreatitis • Myelitis • Encephalopathy • Rhabdomyolysis • Acute kidney injury • Acute liver injury • Acute pancreatitis • Acute colitis • Acute urethritis • Acute vaginitis • Acute proctitis • Acute cervicitis • Acute urethritis • Acute vaginitis • Acute proctitis • Acute cervicitis

Notes: Levamisole is used to treat a wide range of parasitic infections in animals. It is also used to treat a severe infection in some people, known as **leishmaniasis**. This infection is caused by a parasite that is spread by sandflies. It can cause skin lesions, fever, and other symptoms. Levamisole is used to treat this infection in some people.

Xylazine – The Basics

Xylazine The Basics

What is xylazine?
 Xylazine is used for large animals as an anesthetic and muscle relaxant. It is approved for use in Canada under the following names: **Rojectan** (Rojectan Veterinary), **Rojectan** (Rojectan Veterinary), **Rojectan** (Rojectan Veterinary), and **Rojectan** (Rojectan Veterinary). It is not approved for human use because of severe side effects including respiratory, cardiac, and respiratory depression.

How often is xylazine detected in BC?
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What can happen if someone uses xylazine?
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How much xylazine can make you sick?
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Xylazine – For Healthcare Providers

Xylazine
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Benzodiazepines found in Opioids in British Columbia

Summary Sheet for Health Professionals: Benzodiazepines found in Opioids in British Columbia

BC Cases:
 Benzodiazepines found in opioids in British Columbia. The number of cases has increased significantly in recent years. In 2023, there were 503 cases, compared to 202 in 2022 and 103 in 2021.

Drug Checking Services:
 Drug checking services are available in British Columbia. These services can help identify the presence of benzodiazepines in opioids. In 2023, there were 202 cases, compared to 103 in 2022 and 50 in 2021.

What are the risks of benzodiazepines found in opioids?
 Benzodiazepines found in opioids can cause severe side effects, including respiratory depression, cardiac arrest, and death. These risks are increased when the substances are used together.

How can we reduce the risks of benzodiazepines found in opioids?
 Drug checking services can help identify the presence of benzodiazepines in opioids. These services can help reduce the risks of severe side effects and death.

Carfentanyl Information Sheet

Unregulated Drug Supply Substance Information Sheet - August 2025

CARFENTANYL (kar-FEN-tan-ill)

Reason for this information sheet
 Carfentanyl is a highly potent synthetic opioid. It is used to treat pain in some people, but it is also used recreationally. It is highly addictive and can cause severe side effects, including respiratory depression, cardiac arrest, and death.

What we know about carfentanyl
 Carfentanyl is a highly potent synthetic opioid. It is used to treat pain in some people, but it is also used recreationally. It is highly addictive and can cause severe side effects, including respiratory depression, cardiac arrest, and death.

In the unregulated drug supply
 Carfentanyl is found in the unregulated drug supply in British Columbia. It is often found in combination with other substances, such as fentanyl and heroin. This combination can increase the risks of severe side effects and death.

How carfentanyl may affect people
 Carfentanyl is a highly potent synthetic opioid. It is used to treat pain in some people, but it is also used recreationally. It is highly addictive and can cause severe side effects, including respiratory depression, cardiac arrest, and death.

Glossary

Central nervous system refers to the body system made up of the brain and spinal cord that controls most of the body's functions, including breathing, movement, thinking, and speech.

Controlled substance refers to substances that are controlled under the federal Controlled Drugs and Substances Act (CDSA).

Euphoria refers to a feeling of intense happiness and excitement.

Hallucinate means to experience a sensory perception (like seeing, hearing, or feeling) something that is not there.

Hallucinogen use disorder refers to a problematic pattern of hallucinogen use that significantly interferes with a person's functioning.

Level of consciousness refers to describe a person's level of wakefulness, alertness, and awareness.

Neurotransmitter refers to a chemical messenger in the body that carries signals from one nerve cell to another cell.

Novel substances refers to new chemicals or compounds that may not have specific laws that govern their use.

Opioid dependence refers to a process where the body adapts and becomes reliant on opioids. The person will experience withdrawal if opioids are reduced or stopped.

Opioid poisoning refers to harms that happen to a person because of a toxic amount of opioids that overwhelm that body's normal functioning and cause breathing to slow or stop.

Opioid tolerance refers to a process where the body becomes less responsive to the effects of opioids over time. Tolerance means the person needs higher opioid doses to achieve the same effects.

Opioid use disorder refers to a problematic pattern of opioid use that significantly interferes with a person's functioning.

Opioid withdrawal refers to symptoms that happen when a person with an opioid dependence abruptly stops or reduces use of opioids.

Polysubstance use refers to the use of more than one substance at a time.

Potent or potency refers to how strong a substance is. If a substance is potent, it means a small amount has a large effect.

Psychoactive refers to substances that affect mental processes including thinking, perception, mood, consciousness, cognition, or behaviour.

Stimulant-induced psychosis refers to a mental state caused by the use of stimulants where a person experiences disconnection from reality (psychosis) and symptoms such as hallucinations, delusions, and paranoia.

Stimulant-related seizure refers to a type of seizure that happens because of the overstimulating effect of stimulants on the brain.

Stimulant toxicity (overamping) refers to harms that happen to a person because of a toxic amount of stimulants that overwhelm that body's normal functioning.

Stimulant use disorder refers to a problematic pattern of stimulant use that significantly interferes with a person's functioning.

Stimulant withdrawal refers to the physical and psychological symptoms that can occur after stopping or reducing use of stimulants.

Toxic or toxicity refers to the degree to which a substance can cause harm.

Unregulated drug supply refers to substances (drugs) that come from sources that are not regulated for quality or consistency by an oversight body (such as Health Canada). These substances are produced, distributed, bought, and sold outside of regulated systems.

Unregulated substances refer to substances that are not monitored for consistency or quality. This means the potency and contents of substances can be variable and unpredictable.

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Harm Reduction Strategies and Services Committee

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