

Health care patterns and disease diagnosis before unregulated drug poisoning deaths in British Columbia in 2023

An analysis of health care contacts and diagnosis of substance use and mental health disorders among adults who had an unregulated drug death in 2023 compared to the general population in BC. In 2023, 2543 people aged 19 to 79 had a confirmed or suspected drug death.

Recent health care contact



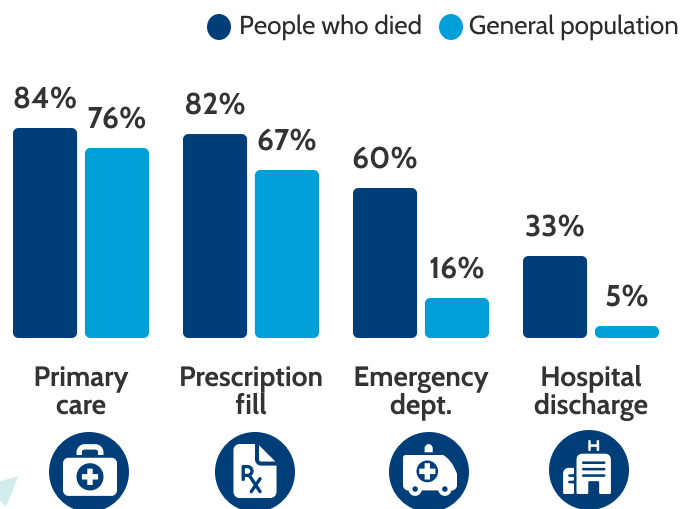
of people who died had a health care encounter in the year before their drug poisoning death.

In comparison, 77% of the general population had a health care encounter in 2023.

Nearly all people who died had contact with the health care system in the year before death, but less than half had encounters related to substance use.

Primary care and pharmacy services were the most common health encounters. Compared with the general population, people who died had more health encounters, particularly emergency department and hospital visits.

Comparing health care encounters in the last year



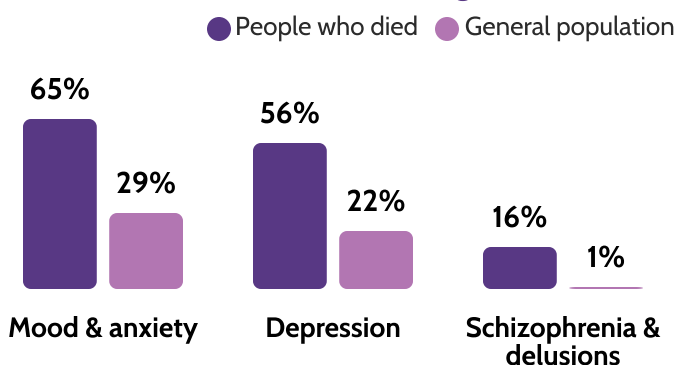
Mental health diagnoses



of people who died had a diagnosis of mood or anxiety disorder, depression, or schizophrenia or delusional disorder in their lifetime.

In the general population, less than 30% had any of these diagnoses.

Percent with a mental health diagnosis



The most common mental health conditions among people who died and the general population are the same, but there are large differences in prevalence.

Substance use health care among people who died



of people who died had a diagnosed Substance Use Disorder (SUD) in their lifetime.

Only 40% received medical care for SUD in the year before death.



1 in 2 had ever received care for Opioid Use Disorder (OUD)



1 in 3 had ever received care for Stimulant Use Disorder (StUD)



Of those with OUD, 60% were dispensed OAT in the year before death.

Of all people who died, <10% were dispensed opioid Prescribed Alternatives in the year before death.

People who died from drug toxicity in 2023 are connected to the health care system, but most encounters are unrelated to substance use.



BC Centre for Disease Control



Health care providers should consider asking all patients, especially those with any mental health or substance use concern, about their use of unregulated substances.

Full results here: Kinniburgh B, Palis H, Desai R, Liu L, Ge W, Zhao B, Hu K, Loewen OK, Nabi M, Au S, Fraser M, Sidhu T, Tu A, Crabtree A. Health system contacts and disease diagnoses among people who died of unregulated drug poisoning in BC in 2023. Knowledge Update. Vancouver, BC: BC Centre for Disease Control, 2025.