

We need to talk about opioid poisonings in our community

Opioid poisonings are happening across Alberta and in most neighbourhoods. And we need to start talking about it. Between January and May 2021, 207 Edmontonians died from opioid poisoning, more than one per day.¹ Nationally, deaths from opioid poisonings increased 89% during the COVID-19 pandemic.²

As doctors who care about, and treat, people who use substances, we are asking every Edmontonian to do three things. The first is to **be a safe person to talk to about substance use**. Be someone who understands that people use substances (legal and illegal) for a variety of different reasons. Not everyone who uses drugs has a substance use disorder but for those that do, help is available. A substance use disorder is a treatable, chronic medical condition that involves complex interactions between brain circuits, genetics, the environment, and someone's life experiences; it is not a moral failing or a choice.³ If someone trusts you enough to talk about their substance use, listen with compassion, not judgment. Use non-stigmatizing language.⁴ Even better, start the conversation with the people you care about and more broadly in your community.

Second, **educate yourself about substance use treatment and recovery**. Learn about the services available in our community, such as Access 24/7⁵ (780-424-2424), and local opioid dependency programs⁶, including a virtual option (<https://vodp.ca>)⁷, which do not require referral from another physician. For people who meet criteria for an opioid use disorder, treatment with medication can reduce the risk of death from any cause *by more than half*.⁸

¹ Alberta Health. Alberta Substance Use Surveillance System. <https://www.alberta.ca/substance-use-surveillance-data.aspx> Accessed July 18, 2021.

² Government of Canada. Opioid- and Stimulant-related harms in Canada. <https://health-infobase.canada.ca/substance-related-harms/opioids-stimulants/> Accessed July 18, 2021.

³ American Society of Addiction Medicine. Definition of Addiction. <https://www.asam.org/Quality-Science/definition-of-addiction> Accessed July 18, 2021.

⁴ Canadian Centre on Substance use and Addiction. Changing the Language of Addiction. <https://www.ccsa.ca/sites/default/files/2019-04/CCSA-Language-of-Addiction-Words-Matter-Fact-Sheet-2017-en.pdf> Accessed July 18, 2021.

⁵ Alberta Health Services. Access 24/7. <https://www.albertahealthservices.ca/findhealth/Service.aspx?id=1077952&serviceAtFacilityID=1122569> Accessed July 18, 2021.

⁶ College of Physicians and Surgeons of Alberta. Opioid Agonist Treatment Program. <https://cpsa.ca/physicians/competence/physician-prescribing-practices/opioid-agonist-treatment-program/> Accessed July 18, 2021.

⁷ Virtual Opioid Dependency Clinic. <https://vodp.ca> Accessed July 18, 2021.

⁸ Santo T, Clark B, Hickman M et al. "Association of Opioid Agonist Treatment With All-Cause Mortality and Specific Causes of Death Among People with Opioid Dependence: A Systematic Review and Meta-analysis" *JAMA Psychiatry* Published online June 2, 2021. doi:10.1001/jamapsychiatry.2021.0976

Lastly, **understand how to identify and respond to someone experiencing opioid poisoning.**

People experiencing opioid poisoning will have slow or no breathing, be difficult or impossible to wake up, appear pale or blue, and have tiny pupils.⁹ Call 911 and initiate basic life support. Naloxone is a medication that temporarily reverses the effects of opioids. If you think you may witness an opioid poisoning, pick up a naloxone kit, and learn how to use it, free of charge from any emergency department or your local pharmacy (see the footnote for an interactive map).¹⁰

If you are someone who uses non-prescribed opioids, or any substance purchased from the illegal market, you may be at risk of death from opioid poisoning. The street drug supply is poisonous and unpredictable, and many substances are contaminated with highly toxic synthetic opioids. You may not be using what you think you are. Please don't use alone, have naloxone available, and talk to someone you trust about a safer use plan; or, if using alone is your only option, use a virtual service like the Digital Overdose Response System (www.dorsapp.ca) or the National Overdose Response Service (www.nors.ca, 1-888-688-NORS).

We watched our communities and neighbours help each other during the COVID-19 pandemic. This crisis also requires a neighbourhood-level response. Start the conversation, know where to go for help, and be prepared to respond. We are still in it together.

For more information, visit the City of Edmonton's web page on Drug Poisoning Prevention: <https://www.edmonton.ca/programs-services/communities/drug-poisoning-overdose-prevention>

⁹ Alberta Health Services. Drug Safe: Opioids. <https://www.albertahealthservices.ca/info/Page16025.aspx> Accessed July 18, 2021.

¹⁰ Alberta Health Services. Get Naloxone. <https://www.albertahealthservices.ca/info/Page15586.aspx> Accessed July 18, 2021.