



Opioid Poisoning Prevention Response

Edmonton is amid an opioid crisis, as many of us have heard in the news regularly and how it is affecting the public, especially our unhoused population. What we may not be aware of is just how critical this crisis really is. It is a national concern, however western Canada (BC and Alberta) and Yukon/NWT have been significantly impacted. A driving cause is that the street supply is incredibly unsafe being mixed with unknown substances, primarily Fentanyl (84% of accidental opioid toxicity deaths).

How are we affected locally?

For example, according to Drug-Alerts-Edmonton, in the week of May 1-7, 2023, EMS Edmonton responded to 102 opioid-related emergencies, compared to 73 EMS opioid-related responses the previous week (a 40% increase). Of those 102 calls, 94 required naloxone and 54 resulted in transport to hospital. These are only the ones we know about.

What is Naloxone?

Naloxone or Narcan is a medication used to temporarily reverse the effects of an opioid overdose. In very layman's terms, it attaches itself to the same brain receptors as the opioid and removes it typically for 30-90 minutes. Which means if there is no opioid to reverse, then naloxone has no effect.

What effect does Naloxone have on other substances?

This is cause for concern when the street supply is infiltrated with mixes of opioids and benzodiazepines(benzo); it may work on the opioid but will not effectively reverse the benzo. Etizolam, in particular, has been a prominent benzo resulting in a Public Notice June 2019. Furthermore, we are receiving alerts of even more potent, dangerous, lethal substances such as Xylazine, (a tranquilizer/heroin mix) being detected in the circulating street supply in Edmonton and Calgary, which naloxone has no effect in reversing regardless of how much is administered.

What can you do?

Anyone can carry a naloxone kit. The injectable-version kits are free to the public and are available at most pharmacies across Alberta. You do not require a prescription and you do not need to show identification or your health care card to obtain one. Carry a kit, take the training, it can save a life.

References:

Federal, provincial, and territorial Special Advisory Committee on the Epidemic of Opioid Overdoses. Opioid- and Stimulant-related Harms in Canada. Ottawa: Public Health Agency of Canada; December 2023. <https://health-infobase.canada.ca/substance-related-harms/opioids-stimulants/>

Public Health Agency of Canada, Ottawa, Ontario, Canada