GOVERNMENT OF CANADA

FEDERAL ACTIONS ON OPIOIDS TO DATE

Recent federal actions

• Granted a three-year exemption under the Controlled Drugs and Substances Act (CDSA), so that adults 18 years and older in British Columbia will not be subject to criminal charges for personal possession of up to 2.5 grams total of opioids, cocaine, methamphetamine, or MDMA, or some combination thereof, between January 31, 2023 and January 31, 2026 provided certain conditions are met.
• Released a report on drug- and alcohol-related acute toxicity deaths in Canada between 2016 and 2017 summarizing the characteristics of the people who died, the circumstances of their deaths, and the substances involved.
• Updated modelling projections through mid-2023, to understand and plan for potential scenarios. Under some scenarios, opioid-related deaths may remain high or may decrease, but not to levels seen before the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic.
• Former Bill C-5 received Royal Assent and came into force on November 17, 2022. It repealed mandatory minimum penalties for all drug offences in the CDSA and requires police and prosecutors to consider diverting people to treatment programs, when appropriate, giving a warning, or taking no further action instead of charging and prosecuting simple drug possession offences. It also requires that past and future convictions for the simple possession of controlled drugs be kept separate and apart after a certain period of time.
• Launched a campaign aimed at men working in trades, who are disproportionately affected by the opioid overdose crisis, to promote help-seeking and link to resources and supports.

Government funding

• Committed over $800M since 2017 to directly address the opioid overdose crisis and help save lives; this includes funding community organizations for projects through the Substance Use and Addictions Program and the Supporting Pathways to Care for People Who Use Drugs program (funding has now sunset) to support people who use drugs. For example by:
  • supporting projects related to treatment including expanding Opioid Agonist Therapy (OAT) services and creating best practices
  • supporting prescription-led safer supply service delivery projects to help save lives by providing people at risk of overdose with prescribed medications instead of the highly toxic and unpredictable illegal drug supply
  • supporting a National Safer Supply Community of Practice and research/development/transfer and exchange projects, to help gather and share the evidence around safer supply
  • increasing awareness and access to naloxone throughout projects that provide training, awareness and distribution of the life saving drug
  • helping to reduce stigma and support families affected by the overdose crisis
  • improving harm reduction initiatives, to reach key groups, including Indigenous peoples, youth, post-secondary students, individuals in the correctional system, and healthcare professionals
  • providing better access to peer support and capacity-building projects to support those disproportionately affected by substance use or who face barriers accessing services, including women and youth
• Providing up to $4.5 million over 5 years to support Pain Canada, a national initiative that brings together 14 pain organizations to support national coordination and mobilize resources to build capacity to improve systems of care and support for people with pain.
• Investing over $22.5 million to support 17 pain-related projects, including funding to McMaster University’s Michael G. DeGroote National Pain Centre to update the 2017 Canadian Guideline for Opioids for Chronic Non-Cancer Pain.
• Invested an additional $500 million through the Safe Restart Agreement towards health care to respond to COVID-19, including support for people experiencing challenges with substance use, mental health, or homelessness.
• Providing over $650 million in 2022-2023 to support culturally grounded community-based mental wellness initiatives which includes funding for substance use prevention and treatment, mental wellness teams, the Hope for Wellness Help Line and more.

Enforcement and the toxic illegal drug supply

• Issued a new Order under the Controlled Drugs and Substances Act to help address the illegal importation and distribution of a group of novel fentanyl precursors that are used in the illegal production of fentanyl and its analogues.
• Released guidance to consider alternatives to prosecution for simple drug possession offences, except when there are serious public safety concerns.
• Identified opioids 105,848 times from 2018 to September 2022 in exhibits submitted to the Drug Analysis Service by law enforcement and public health officials (exhibits may contain more than one opioid).
• Working with domestic and international partners to reduce the illegal opioid supply by:
  • Continuing to seize fentanyl and opioids in addition to precursor chemicals that can be used in the production of illegal synthetic drugs.
  • Providing border services officers with tools to safely identify and interdict fentanyl and other toxic substances at the border, including:
    • Implementing 81 safe examination areas at high risk ports of entry to assist in identifying and examining shipments suspected to contain opioids.
    • Operationalizing field drug analysis sites with on-site chemists in Toronto, Montreal and Vancouver.
    • Maintaining 6 detector dog teams trained to detect fentanyl and other drugs.
  • Working with private sector partners to address money laundering of the proceeds of fentanyl trafficking.
• Continuing to investigate and charge criminal actors suspected of diverting chemical products for the purpose of manufacturing illicit substances.

Cancer Pain

DeGroote
Michael G.

Pain Canada

Hope

for Wellness Help Line

Enforcement and the toxic illegal drug supply
Access to treatment

- Supported provinces and territories to improve access to treatment services by providing $150M via the Emergency Treatment Fund, which, when cost-matched by provinces and territories, will total over $300M.
- Started developing national standards for mental health and substance use services to provide an evidence-based framework for service delivery.
- Supported federally-funded treatment centres for First Nations and Inuit to create and enhance their virtual treatment services since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic.
- Supported the development of guidance for health care providers, including:
  - clinical guidelines (PDF document) and operational guidance (PDF document) for injectable opioid agonist treatment.
  - national treatment guidelines for opioid use disorders.
- Removed barriers to accessing drugs used for the treatment of opioid use disorder by:
  - Issuing a class exemption for patients, practitioners, and pharmacists prescribing and providing controlled substances in Canada to ensure continuity of care.
  - Approving injectable hydromorphone and diacetylmorphine as treatment options for patients with severe opioid use disorder.
  - Facilitating the prescribing and dispensing of methadone and diacetylmorphine through regulatory amendments.
- Supporting Opioid Agonist Therapy wraparound supports in 72 First Nations and Inuit Communities and 11 new sites in development.
- Authorized pharmacists to transfer, extend and renew prescriptions for patients under their professional treatment and allowed practitioners to verbally prescribe controlled substances to help get Canadians the prescription drugs they need in their communities.
- Added a temporary category of eligible health and well-being activities and expenses through the Reaching Home program, including addictions support services that are already provided by provinces and territories and hiring health care professionals to provide services to clients.
- Increased the provision of opioid agonist treatment and implementing SMART (Self-management and Recovery Training) in Canada’s correctional institutions.

Access to harm reduction

- Provided exemptions for 39 supervised consumption sites, which have as of October 2022:
  - been visited more than 3.8 million times
  - reversed over 42,000 overdoses without a single death
  - made over 208,000 referrals to health and social services.
- Improved access to overdose prevention services by allowing provinces and territories to establish temporary spaces where people can consume drugs under supervision to reduce risk of overdose death within existing supervised consumption sites, shelters or other temporary sites as needed.
- Supported the Good Samaritan Drug Overdose Act, which provides some legal protection from simple drug possession charges for people who seek emergency help during an overdose.
- Continued to improve access to naloxone, including to remote communities and isolated First Nations and Inuit communities and people experiencing homelessness.
- Supported a drug checking technology challenge to promote development of new drug checking technologies, which included awarding a grand prize of $1 million to Scatr Inc.
- Opened the first Overdose Prevention Service in a correctional institution to reduce overdose incidents.
- Continuing to support the delivery of harm reduction activities to help reduce risks and connect individuals and families experiencing homelessness with key health and social services through the Reaching Home program.

Awareness and prevention

- Expanded public awareness around opioids and the harms of stigma:
  - In November 2018, launched a multi-year campaign to raise awareness of opioids, how to respond to an overdose, the Good Samaritan Drug Overdose Act and the impacts of stigma on people who use drugs.
  - Developed and distributed awareness resources for opioids, such as videos, fact sheets, posters, wallet cards, and an audio series.
  - Between April 2018 and November 2022, the Know More: Opioids awareness program engaged in 1,161 high school sessions, 68 post-secondary school events, 43 events/festivals and over 169,900 interactions with people.
  - Reached out to 988 festival organizers to provide information about naloxone and encouraged the distribution of overdose prevention materials to event goers and staff.
- Established the Chronic Pain Policy Team to coordinate federal efforts to respond to the Canadian Pain Task Force recommendations for priority actions, so that pain is understood, prevented, and effectively treated.
- Supported the development of Soar Above Stigma, a resource that provides outreach support and stigma education for Indigenous community members dealing with addiction or mental health issues.
- Shared best practices for addressing substance use stigma within the Canadian health system, including through use of compassionate and non-stigmatizing language.
- Continued engagement activities with law enforcement to promote uptake of an online Drug Stigma Awareness Training module.
- Developed a toolkit of resources for employers of Canadians working in the trades and related industries to help reduce the harms of substance use.
- Developed a Blueprint for Action and policy paper for schools and community organizations that support youth, outlining practical approaches for schools to prevent substance-related harms among youth.
- Adopted non-stigmatizing language in Health Services products and reviewing staff training and education aimed at reducing substance-related stigma in Canada’s correctional system.

Evidence

- Renewed $17 million investment in research to address substance use in Canada to ensure the continuation and expansion of the Canadian Research Initiative in Substance Misuse research and knowledge mobilization activities focused on substance use harms, such as opioids.
- Released results of the Canadian Wastewater Survey with information on drugs and drug metabolites in wastewater samples collected from five cities.
- Established an Expert Task Force on Substance Use that provided independent, expert recommendations on the federal government’s drug policy and potential alternatives to criminal penalties for simple possession.
- Continued collaboration with provinces and territories to support ongoing quarterly reporting of national data on opioid- and stimulant-related deaths, hospitalizations and Emergency Medical Services responses.
- Published a toolkit with resources for stakeholders to respond to a need for information on medications for people at risk of overdose during the pandemic.
- Funded the development of a series of national guidance documents and a national qualitative assessment identifying the needs and challenges of people who use drugs during COVID-19.
- Funded a qualitative assessment of 10 safer supply projects through surveys and interviews with safer supply program leaders, staff and participants to capture early learnings, including effective strategies for program delivery.
- Invested over $2 million to evaluate program implementation and impacts of safer supply pilot projects, and to assess the public health impacts of supervised consumption sites located in British Columbia, the Prairies, Ontario and Quebec-Atlantic.
- Released several reports related to furthering knowledge around opioids.
Opioid-related harms in Canada

From January 2016 to June 2022:

- **Deaths**: 32,632 apparent opioid-related deaths
- **Hospitalizations**: 33,493 hospitalizations for opioid-related overdoses

The majority of deaths (90%) occurred in British Columbia, Alberta, and Ontario; high rates were also observed in other regions.

Between January and June 2022:

- **Deaths**
  - 3,556 apparent opioid-related deaths
  - About 20 deaths/day
  - 97% were accidental
  - 3 in 4 were male
  - 88% were young and middle aged adults (20 to 59 years)
  - 76% involved fentanyl
  - 47% involved a stimulant

- **Hospitalizations**
  - 2,524 hospitalizations for opioid-related overdoses
  - About 14 hospitalizations/day
  - 72% were accidental
  - 2 in 3 were male
  - 54% were young and middle aged adults (20 to 49 years)
  - 32% involved fentanyl
  - 16% involved a stimulant

- **Emergency Medical Services**
  - 18,287 Emergency Medical Services responses for suspected opioid-related overdoses
  - Nearly 3 in 4 were male
  - The majority were young and middle aged adults (20 to 49 years)

Notes on data:
- Data on opioid- and stimulant-related harms in Canada are updated quarterly.
- Refer to technical notes for more information.

Learn more at Canada.ca/Opioids