

# What we know about stimulant use and drug poisoning in BC

According to the BC Coroner Service, between January 2019 and October 2022 there were 6,856 drug toxicity deaths and stimulants were reported among the top three drugs relevant to death (1. fentanyl, 2. cocaine, 3. methamphetamine). Population level data show an increase in stimulant use and in concurrent use of stimulants and opioids. This factsheet provides findings on the association between stimulant use and unregulated drug poisoning deaths.

## What is a stimulant?

A stimulant is a drug such as methamphetamine, cocaine, or other amphetamine type substances. These substances are sometimes referred to as crack, coke, meth, or side. A person using stimulants may feel more alert, energetic, or awake.

Compared to people who use opioids, people who use stimulants were under 30 years, male, and have co-occurring physical or mental health conditions. Services for people who use stimulants should be tailored for youth and people with multiple health needs.

## Characteristics of people who use stimulants

## People who use stimulants have a similar risk of drug poisoning death compared to people who use opioids

The stimulant supply is increasingly contaminated. According to the BC Centre on Substance Use Drug Checking Dashboard, 1 in 25 stimulant samples contain fentanyl and over 1 in 15 stimulant samples do not match the drug for which it was tested.

People who use stimulants may not be expecting opioids in their drugs or are opioid naïve so have a lower tolerance to opioids. This could explain the similar risk of drug poisoning death among people who only use stimulants compared to people who only use opioids.

## 2x People who use both stimulants and opioids have an increased risk of illicit drug toxicity death compared to people who only use opioids

People may use stimulants at the same time, or many hours before or after, opioids. The mode of ingestion (e.g. oral, inhalation, injection) can impact the risk of drug poisoning. The contaminated drug supply can also change drug use patterns. People use opioids and stimulant together for many reasons, including:

- For self medication to manage mental health conditions and/or physical dependence.
- As a preference (i.e. because people want to) and/or because of the availability of stimulants compared to opioids.
- Due to drug effects or properties, such as the high it provides or other properties of the substance. This may include the desire to balance out the effects of opioids, stimulants, benzodiazepines or other substances.
- For financial reasons or for survival, including cost-effectiveness or to help with staying awake when managing unstable housing or life circumstances.

This factsheet presents data from the BC Provincial Overdose Cohort and the Harm Reduction Client Survey. The Provincial Overdose Cohort identified people who use stimulants using clinical diagnostic codes in provincial health data and the Harm Reduction Client Survey identified stimulant use through self-reporting in a survey.

### References

Concurrent use of opioids and stimulants and risk of fatal overdose: A cohort study  
<https://bmcpublichealth.biomedcentral.com/articles/10.1186/s12889-022-14506-w>

Motivations for concurrent use of uppers and downers among people who access harm reduction services in British Columbia, Canada  
<https://bmjopen.bmj.com/content/bmjopen/12/5/e060447.full.pdf>

BC Coroner Service Illicit Drug Toxicity Report: <https://www2.gov.bc.ca/assets/gov/birth-adoption-death-marriage-and-divorce/deaths/coroners-service/statistical/illicit-drug.pdf>

BC Centre on Substance Use Drug Checking Dashboard: <https://drugcheckingbc.ca/dashboard/>