

# OPIOID AND STIMULANT OVERDOSES

*Montréal is currently seeing a rise in overdoses linked to drug use, particularly due to the sale of increasingly powerful and unpredictable substances available on the black market.*

*After decreasing in 2021–2022, the number of deaths linked to suspected drug poisoning reported to Bureau du coroner du Québec rose by 28% in 2022–2023 (134 vs 172 deaths). Non-fatal overdoses are also on the rise. Visits to supervised consumption services requiring emergency interventions increased 5-fold (9 to 49 visits per month) between 2019–2020 and 2022–2023; Urgences-santé interventions for intoxications where naloxone was used tripled between 2019–2020 and 2022–2023 (14 to 41 interventions a month).*

An overdose is the consumption of an excessive dose of a substance that exceeds the level the body can tolerate. An overdose can have serious effects, including death.

**When consuming drugs, the risks of overdose increase when several drugs are used at the same time.**

In 2022, among the deaths linked to suspected drug poisoning reported to Bureau du coroner du Québec, stimulants were detected in 63% of cases and fentanyl (an opioid) in 23% of cases. Note that the detected substance does not necessarily mean it was the cause of death.

Over the past few years, the Direction régionale de santé publique de Montréal has issued many communications identifying combinations of substances of concern being sold on the black market; for example,

- blue or fuchsia-coloured powders sold as heroin contained a mixture of heroin, fentanyl and etizolam (benzodiazepine analogues).
- blue pills with rounded corners and marked “A/215” (imitation of oxycodone) contained nitazenes.

**To act quickly, it is important to be able to recognize the signs of overdose.**

What are opioids, fentanyl and nitazenes?

Opioids produce a numbing effect and can induce euphoria. They are substances extracted from a plant (opium poppy) or products made in a lab that have similar effects (synthetic opioids).

**Fentanyl** is an opioid that is 40 times stronger than heroin and 100 times stronger than morphine. **Nitazenes** (e.g., isotonitazene, protonitazene, etodesnitazene) are synthetic opioids that are equally or more potent than fentanyl.

Fentanyl and nitazenes present high risks of overdose and death, especially for new and occasional users, and for people who are starting to use again after quitting.

These two opioids also raise tolerance levels in regular users:

- When used regularly, the numbing or euphoric effects of opioids weaken over time. To avoid withdrawal symptoms, users tend to increase the amount consumed in a day.

Fentanyl and nitazenes are sold in different forms (e.g., pills, powders) and can be found in small quantities in other products, including stimulants and heroin.

What are stimulants?

Stimulants are substances that increase the nervous system activity, state of alert, attention and energy. They can also raise blood pressure and accelerate heart and respiratory rates.

Examples of stimulants: cocaine, crack, crystal meth (methamphetamine), amphetamines.

**Using stimulants during heat waves increases risks of overdose and death, regardless of consumption method (e.g., injection or inhalation).**

## Signs of opioid overdose

Opioids have effects on a person's state of alertness and on the part of the brain that controls breathing. Opioid use can cause difficulty breathing (respiratory depression) and even death.

Signs of opioid overdose:

- No reaction to sounds (e.g., shouting the person's name) or pain (unconscious)
- Laboured or snore-like breathing, or not breathing
- Lips and tips of fingers blueish

In case of opioid overdose:

- Try to provoke a reaction in the person: shout the person's name, talk to them loudly, and rub hard on the centre of the person's chest (sternum)
- Call 911
- Administer a dose of naloxone, if available

**Mixing opioids with other "depressive" substances (e.g., alcohol, sedatives like benzodiazepines or xylazine) increases the risks of deadly overdose.**

Currently, opioids sold on the black market are often mixed with benzodiazepines.

## Signs of stimulant overdose

Stimulants can also cause overdoses when their effects become excessive and dangerous for health.

Signs of stimulant overdose:

- Higher body temperature
- Excessive sweating
- Heart palpitations, chest pain
- Panic, paranoia, confusion, agitation
- Muscle spasms, uncontrolled movements

- Convulsions

In case of stimulant overdose:

- Call 911

**Naloxone does not neutralize the effects of stimulant overdose.**

## Precautions to take when using

When using drugs issued from the black market:

- Avoid using alone.
- When using with other people, don't all use at the same time.
- Take a smaller dose of the drug to test its effects.
- Use supervised consumption services.
- Use drug checking services.
- If possible, use fentanyl test strips.
- Have naloxone close at hand and know how to use it if someone shows signs of overdose.
- Know the signs of overdose.

In case of overdose:

- Call 911

**The *Good Samaritan Drug Overdose Act* provides immunity from simple possession charges for anyone who calls 911 about an overdose.**

## Naloxone: antidote to opioid overdoses

Naloxone is an antidote used to neutralize the effects of opioid overdose.

It must be administered as soon as a person shows signs of overdose.

Where to get naloxone

In Montréal, naloxone is available without a prescription and is free in pharmacies as well as in some health care settings and community organizations.

- [Find a resource that provides naloxone](#)
- [Where to obtain naloxone at all times in Québec \(inspq.qc.ca\)](#)

The logo below identifies sites where naloxone is available at all times.



Types of available naloxone kit

- Injectable naloxone kit

- Intranasal naloxone kit

How to administer naloxone

- [See the page about naloxone on the Government of Québec website](#)

## **Supervised consumption services**

In Montréal, people who use drugs are encouraged to use supervised consumption services, where staff can intervene in case of overdose.

- [See the section about supervised consumption services](#)

## **Drug checking services**

In Montréal, people who use drugs are encouraged to use drug checking services.

- [See the section about drug checking services](#)

## **Help and Resources**

### **List of addiction treatment resources in Montréal**

- [See the list of resources on the Government of Québec website](#)

### **Other sources of information**

- [Find a resource that provides naloxone](#)
- [Centre québécois de lutte aux dépendances \(CQLD\)](#)
- [Québec.ca](#)
- [Health Canada](#)
- [Rescuing a person from a possible opioid overdose \(Québec.ca\)](#)