
BACKGROUND

Insite

Insite, North America's first legal supervised injection site, has been offering supervised injection services for people who use illicit drugs since 2003. Insite had an average of 722 visits per day in 2015, including an average of 440 injection room visits.

Insite is a part of a continuum of care for people with addiction, mental illness and HIV/AIDS. It was designed to be accessible to people who inject drugs who are often not well connected to health care services.

For people with chronic drug addiction, Insite can be the first rung on the ladder from chronic drug addiction to possible recovery; from being ill to becoming well. Besides providing clinical services such as immunizations and wound care, the facility has addictions counsellors, mental health workers, and peer staff who connect clients to community resources such as housing, withdrawal management (detox) and addiction treatment, and other supportive services.

For details visit <http://supervisedinjection.vch.ca/en/>.

What are opioids?

Opioids are a class of drug that includes heroin, oxycodone, fentanyl, codeine, morphine and methadone. They can be prescribed by a physician for pain relief. Opioid drug overdose happens when someone takes more than their body can handle. Opioids can suppress breathing, and in cases of overdose, can result in severe brain damage and even death due to oxygen deprivation.

What is fentanyl?

Fentanyl is a synthetic opioid, a prescription drug used primarily for cancer patients in severe pain. It is roughly 50 to 100 times more toxic than morphine. In recent years, illegally manufactured fentanyl has been found as a contaminant in supplies of illicit drugs such as heroin.

Drug Checking

Drug checking is a harm reduction intervention that allows people who use illicit drugs to check their drugs for contaminants, typically using simple point of use testing methods. In Canada, it has most often been offered in association with raves and music festivals. The results of drug checking may encourage uptake of other harm reduction interventions or adoption of safer drug use practices.

Prevent an overdose

Follow these tips to reduce the chance of experiencing an overdose:

- Don't use alone
- Start with a small amount
- Mixing substances, including alcohol, increases risk of overdose
- Use where help is easily available (e.g. Insite, around other people)
- Make a plan/know how to respond in case of an overdose

Signs of an opioid overdose

- Breathing is slow or absent
- Lips and nails are blue
- Person is not moving
- Person may be choking
- Person is snoring or gurgling
- Can't be woken up

- Skin feels cold and clammy
- Pupils are very small

Naloxone

Unintentional deaths and injury from opioid overdose are preventable if they are witnessed and care is provided in a timely manner. Naloxone is a safe drug that can quickly reverse an overdose.

People can be trained to recognize and respond to an overdose by using a free take-home naloxone kit. There are [61 sites](#) in the VCH region, including community health centres and harm reduction services, where people can access the kits. Also, anyone can purchase naloxone from local pharmacies without a prescription.

Expanding supervised injection services

Access to supervised injection, like at Insite and the Dr. Peter Centre, is especially critical given rising overdose rates and the presence of fentanyl in the local illicit drug market. Research has shown that supervised injections save lives and reduce the harms of drug use for people who are actively using injectable drugs.

VCH and Providence Health Care are working on plans to add supervised injection to other harm reduction services in facilities already providing care to injection drug users. Applications for several such services will be made to Health Canada in fall 2016.