

"COVID-19 and Substance Use: A message from the BC Centre on Substance Use"

Nurses working on the front lines of the COVID-19 pandemic are uniquely placed to help people who use drugs stay safe during two public health emergencies: the opioid overdose crisis and COVID-19.



Data from the BC Emergency Health Services shows that despite a recent downward trend in fatalities, non-fatal overdoses have continued at the same or higher rate since the public health emergency was first declared in 2016.

Additionally, most (89%) of all overdoses occur inside, with many (47%) occurring in private residences, and an additional 42% happening in other forms of housing. All areas of the province and every income bracket is affected.

Most recent data from the BC Coroners Services suggests that during COVID-19, fatal overdoses are increasing, suggesting people who use illicit substances are at increased risk of fatal overdose.

Nurses in every area and level of practice interact with people who use drugs. New interim clinical guidance, [Risk Mitigation in the Context of Dual Public Health Emergencies](#) developed by the [BC Centre on Substance Use](#) and [released by the Province of BC](#), provides additional tools to positively impact patient outcomes, keep people safe, and reduce the risk of spread of COVID in the community through supporting social distancing and offering an alternative to the toxic street drug supply.

Nurse practitioners can prescribe medications under this guidance, and all nurses can contribute to the safety of those in their care by familiarizing themselves with Risk Mitigation guidance. LPNs, RNs, and RPNs all can advocate for people who use drugs to have access to safer prescription medications to prevent withdrawal and other harms through this guidance; assist with access to these medications through [nurse delivery of medications](#) including opioid agonist therapy; and provide monitoring and assessment of patients in person or virtually as appropriate.

As we move through variable waves of COVID-19, people who use drugs will need to isolate or physically distance from others to prevent spread in their communities. All nurses are poised to prevent community spread, keep themselves safe through reduced community contacts, and promote public health for all with these crucial supports.

The BCCSU has developed several resources to support the implementation of the new guidance, available here: www.bccsu.ca/covid-19

Additionally, the BCCSU hosted a webinar by nurses, for nurses, about the new guidance and how to support people who use substances during COVID-19. You can watch it here:

- [Webinar: Innovative Approaches to Keep People Safe in the Context of COVID-19 and the Overdose Crisis: The Role of Nurses](#)