

Toxic Drug Crisis Events and Deaths and FNHA's Response

COMMUNITY SITUATION REPORT: FEBRUARY 2023

FNHA Public Health Response

Last updated: May 30, 2023

Introduction

Each month, the First Nations Health Authority (FNHA) reports on the number of toxic drug poisoning events and deaths that have taken place among First Nations populations in BC. In the report, the FNHA also summarizes the actions that the FNHA is taking in response to the toxic drug emergency. This report covers the period January 1, 2021 to February 28, 2023. For previous reports, see [FNHA's harm reduction webpage](#).

Summary Update (February 2023)

First Nations Toxic Drug Poisoning Events and Deaths

In February 2023, there were a total of 222 paramedic-attended drug poisoning events reported among First Nations people. This represents a 10.1% decrease from the previous month and a 15.3% decrease from February of last year.

First Nations people represented 19.0% of all toxic drug poisoning events this month.

In the first two months of 2023, women represented 37.5% of all First Nations toxic drug poisoning events; among other residents, 23.4% of all drug poisoning events were women.

In February 2023, we lost an additional 31 First Nations people due to toxic drug poisoning. First Nations people represented 17.5% of all deaths this month. Since 2016, the year in which a public health emergency was declared, we have lost 1,673 First Nations people to toxic drug poisoning.

FNHA's Response to the Toxic Drug Emergency

As described in the FNHA Programs and Outcomes section of this report, the FNHA has developed an expanding range of programs and initiatives to combat the toxic drug crisis. These are designed in culturally safe ways that confront the anti-Indigenous racism and systemic inequity built into Canada's health system.

Key programs include First Nations Treatment and Healing Centres, Intensive Case Management (ICM) Teams, Indigenous land-based healing services, Not Just Naloxone training, the development of a network of peer coordinators, hiring of community-facing harm reduction educators, dispensing opioid agonist therapy (OAT), and distributing naloxone.

Provision of OAT

Based on prescription drug claim data of FNHA clients, 2,614 First Nations people were dispensed OAT in February 2023. Of these:



- 59.1% were dispensed methadone, 20.9% were dispensed buprenorphine/naloxone (Suboxone), 18.1% were dispensed slow-release oral morphine (Kadian) and a small percent were dispensed buprenorphine extended-release (Sublocade)
- 1.9% were dispensed OAT through FNHA Health Benefits for the first time

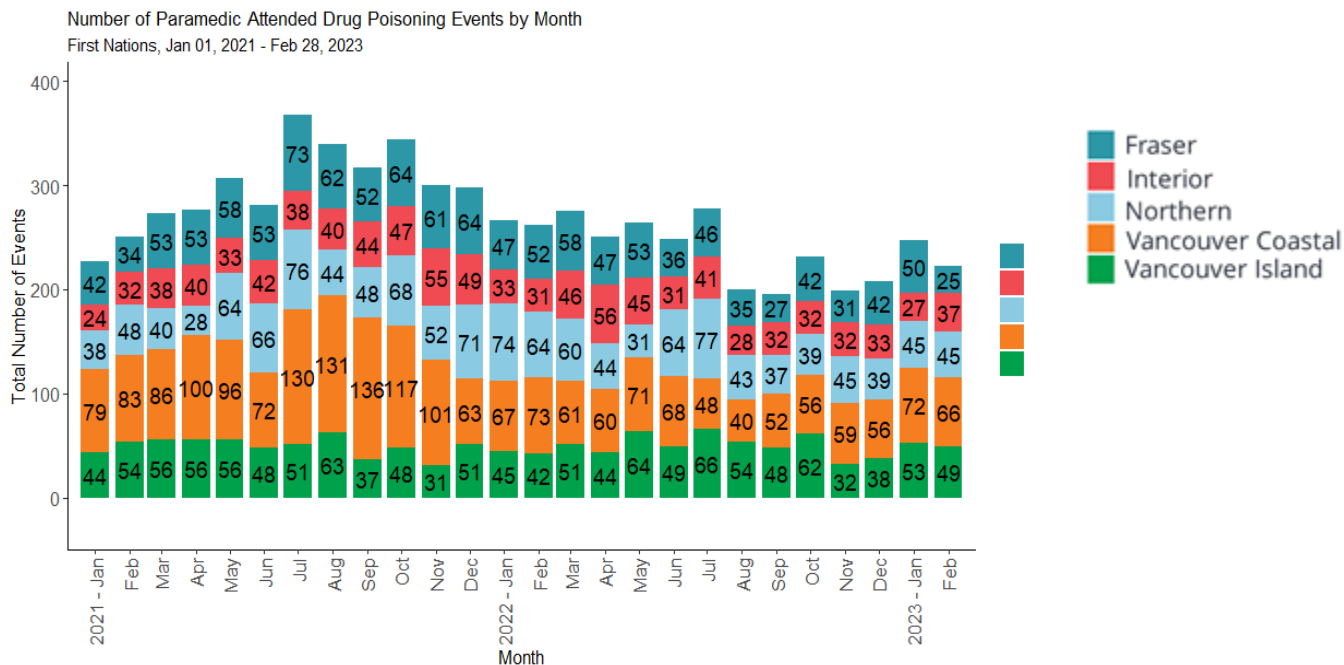
Naloxone Distribution

- Through FNHA’s bulk ordering program, 795 nasal naloxone kits were distributed to First Nations and community organizations in February 2023 (each kit contains two doses), and another 441 doses of nasal naloxone were distributed to FNHA clients through community pharmacies ¹
- 825 injectable naloxone kits were ordered for First Nations sites or Friendship Centres (these kits contain three doses)

Toxic Drug Poisoning Events and Deaths Data (January 1, 2021 to February 28, 2023)

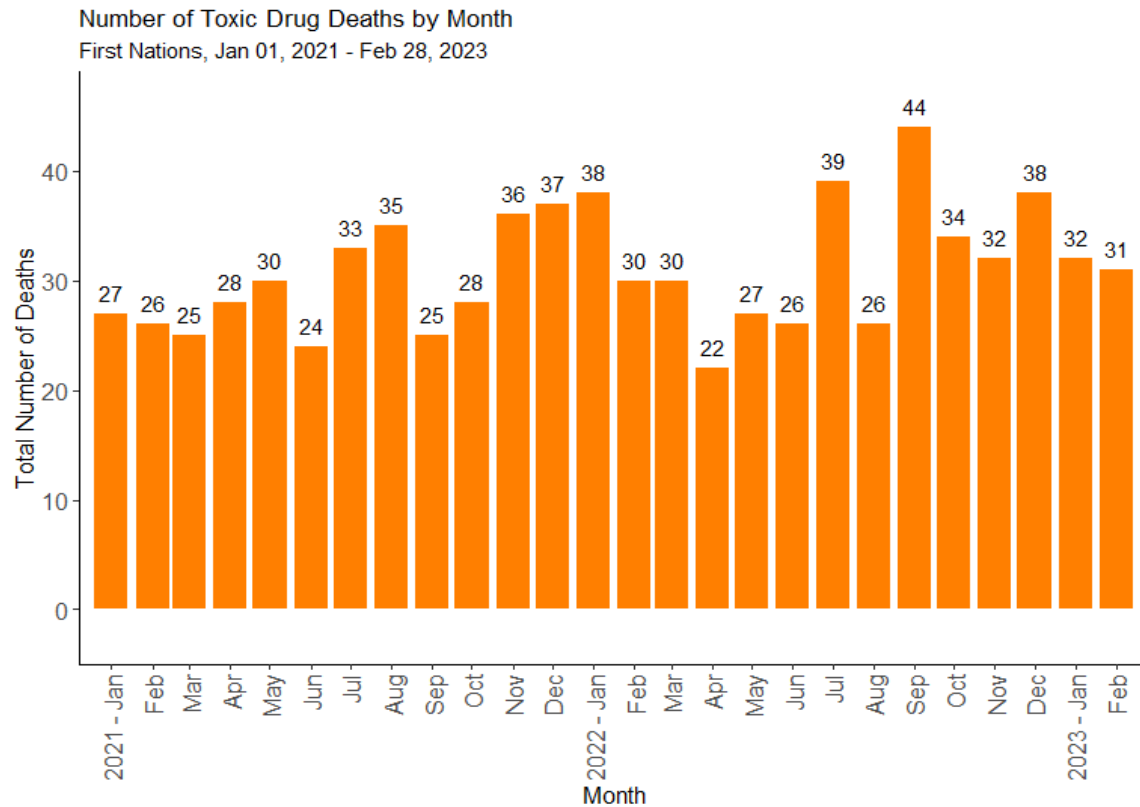
Paramedic-Attended Events by Month

Since COVID-19 was declared a pandemic, there have been increases in the number of both toxic drug events and deaths among First Nations people, although there has been a decline in drug poisoning events since the peak in July 2021.



¹ Effective November 26, 2021, First Nations individuals in BC may obtain 2 kits (4 cartridges) of nasal naloxone every 30 days from pharmacies. First Nations and community organizations that provide harm reduction support primarily to First Nations people may request bulk supply of nasal naloxone; this may be ordered along with other culturally safe harm reduction supplies through FNHA’s harm reduction hub: HarmReduction@fnha.ca.

Deaths by Month



Note: Suppressed when the number of deaths is less than 10 or to avoid back-calculation of another number that is less than 10

Events and Deaths by Region (January 1, 2021 – February 28, 2023)

	Fraser Salish	Interior	Northern	Vancouver Coastal	Vancouver Island	BC
Total Paramedic-Attended Drug Poisoning Events	1,260	986	1,350	2,043	1,292	6,931
Total Number of Deaths	123	130	157	258	135	803
Percentage of the Population that is First Nations ²	1.4%	4.1%	14.8%	2.1%	4.2%	3.3%
Percentage of all Events that were First Nations ³	10.1%	16.1%	50.3%	19.3%	21.6%	18.3%
Percentage of all Deaths that were First Nations*	7.7%	15.7%	42.7%	18.4%	16.5%	16.0%
Crude Drug Poisoning Event Rate (per 1,000) ⁴	48.0	29.5	32.5	84.4	36.1	42.7
OAT Claimants (in February 2023) ⁵	670	347	366	752	562	2,614

* The number of deaths by region and the proportion of all deaths that were First Nations are updated quarterly in order to protect privacy.

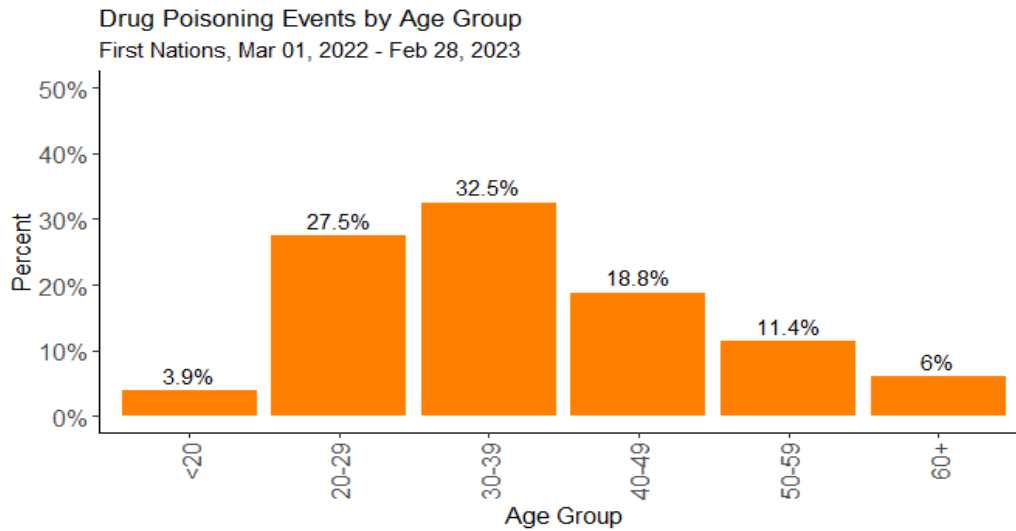
² Based on 2018 estimates from First Nations Client File (FNCF) 2018 and BC Stats Population Estimates.

³ Based on records with a complete Personal Health Number (PHN) only.

⁴ Estimated rate for 2021-2023 based on 26 months of data; 2019 population estimates via 2018 FNCF.

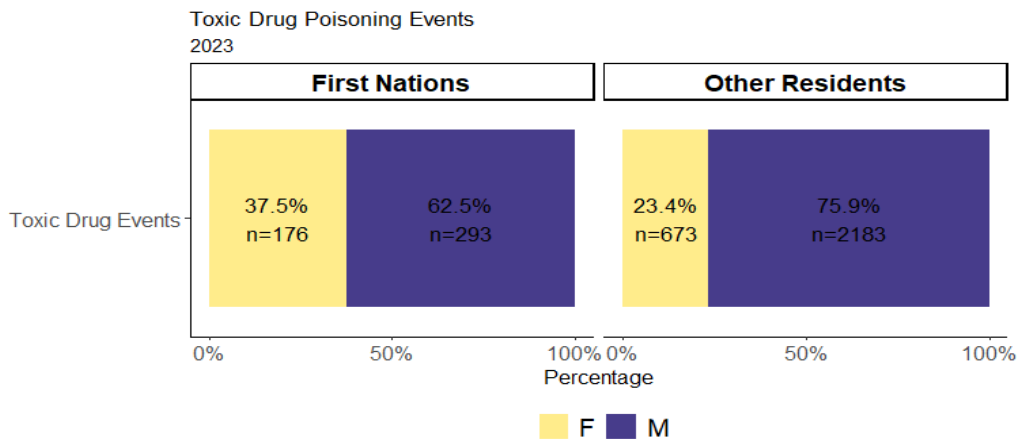
⁵ If a person was a claimant in two or more different regions in any given month they will count as a claimant for each region; hence, the sum of the regions is greater than the BC number presented in the table.

Paramedic-Attended Events by Age Group (1 year Rolling)



Between Mar. 1, 2022 and Feb. 28, 2023, the highest percentage of paramedic-attended drug-poisoning events occurred among the 30-39 year old age group, followed by the 20-29 year old age group. Approximately 59.7% of all First Nations persons who had a paramedic attended drug-poisoning event in February 2023 were younger than 40 years of age.

Paramedic Attended Events by Sex



Note: Data on toxic drug deaths by sex is updated quarterly in order to protect privacy.

Women continue to represent higher proportions of First Nations toxic drug poisoning events and deaths compared to Other Residents.

- 37.5% of toxic drug poisoning events among First Nations involved women, this compares to 23.4% among other residents of BC.

For provincial-level data, please see:

- [Illicit Drug Toxicity Deaths in BC](#) (BC Coroners Service)

- [Overdose in BC during COVID-19](#) (BCCDC)
- [Overdose Response Indicators](#) (BCCDC)

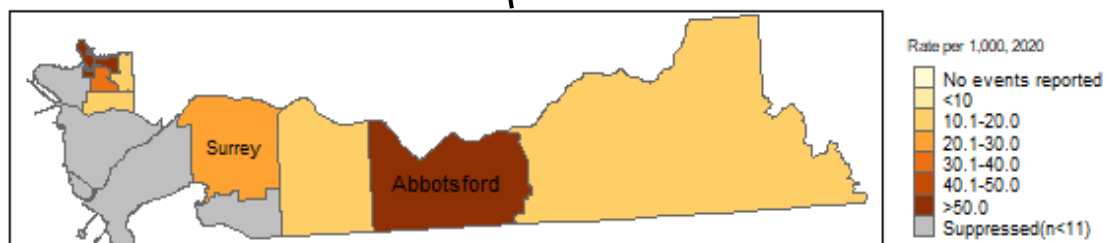
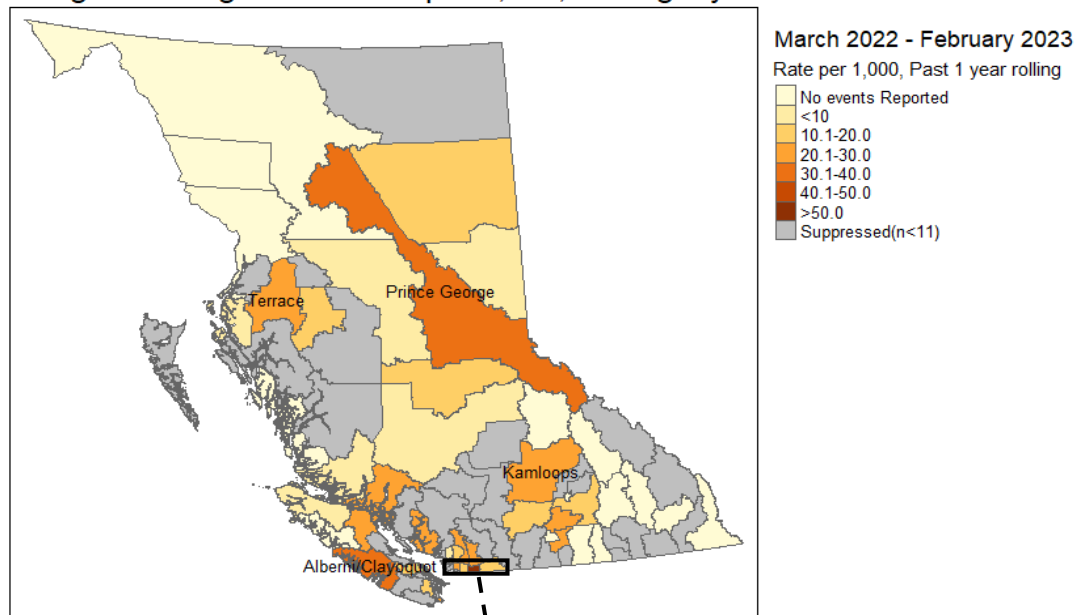
Paramedic-Attended Events by Local Health Area

The local health areas with the highest drug poisoning event rates (indicated on the map below) in the most recent 1 year (March, 2022 – February, 2023) were:

- Vancouver - Centre North (93.6 per 1,000),
- Vancouver - City Centre (67.4 per 1,000),
- Abbotsford (50.9 per 1,000),
- Prince George (34.5 per 1,000),
- Alberni/Clayoquot (33.7 per 1,000) and
- Vancouver - Midtown (30.2 per 1,000).

The local health areas with the highest drug poisoning counts (not displayed on map) were Vancouver - Centre North, Prince George, Alberni/Clayoquot, Kamloops, Terrace and Surrey.

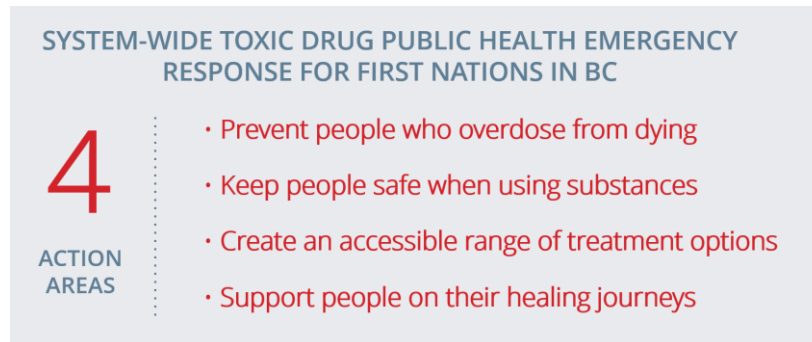
Drug Poisoning Event Rates per 1,000, Rolling 1 year



Note: LHAs with the highest **rates** or highest **number** of events have been labelled in the map above.

FNHA's Response to the Toxic Drug Emergency

FNHA's Toxic Drug Emergency Response Framework for Action spells out an iterative approach to evolving our response to the crisis based on what we hear from community members, health directors, leaders, frontline staff, peers and others throughout the process of implementation.



The full Framework is available here: [A Framework for Action: Responding to the Toxic Drug Crisis for First Nations.](#)

FNHA Programs and Outcomes

As the drug toxicity emergency has unfolded and worsened during the COVID-19 pandemic, the FNHA has implemented numerous ongoing and new programs and initiatives, including:

- Eight **First Nations treatment and healing centres** operate across BC and two new facilities are being planned – one in the Vancouver Coastal region and the other in the Fraser Salish region
- Funding a variety of programs and services that provide wrap-around support for individual and family wellness and access to care in all five regions
- **Indigenous land-based healing services** grounded in cultural teachings are provided at 147 sites across BC
- Virtual and in-person **harm reduction education through Not Just Naloxone training** and community visits; from January 1, 2023 to February 28, 2023, 3 training sessions were held and 44 health care workers, youth, Elders and community champions were trained
- Broadened access to **nasal spray naloxone** through bulk supply ordering by First Nations communities and organizations across BC (see table below)
- **Unlocking the Gates** supports people who are leaving prison and are at a dramatically higher risk of overdose from toxic drugs
- Expanding the regional overdose response capacity with human resources; communities can access support from **addiction specialists and harm reduction educators**
- Increasing access to **OAT**:
 - directly through nurse prescribing: underway at four sites and in approval process at 14 other sites; 29 nurses are enrolled in or have completed prescribing training
 - by supporting 24 rural and remote First Nations communities to improve access to OAT for their members

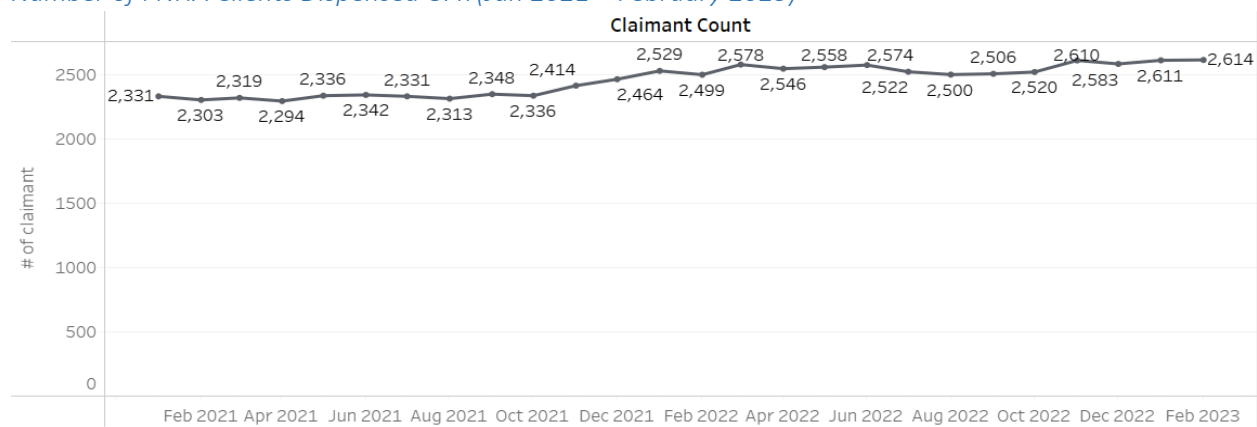
- Developed the **Indigenous Harm Reduction Community Council** – a province-wide network of Indigenous people working on Indigenous approaches to harm reduction. The Council is coordinated by 14 members representing all five regions with a web portal to virtually connect the network
- Approved a [Harm Reduction Policy](#) with five areas for action:
 - increase access to cultural activities
 - expand access to substitution therapies (such as OAT)
 - provide harm reduction services and promote expansion of related strategies
 - engage with people with lived and living experience in design and implementation
 - support expansion of pharmaceutical alternatives to toxic street drugs

The FNHA also has several new and emerging initiatives:

- The FNHA is partnering to establish **First-Nations-focused overdose prevention sites (OPS) and mobile harm reduction services**
 - in the Fraser Salish region, the FNHA partnering with Cheam First Nation and Fraser Health to implement a first of its kind **OPS** in the Cheam First Nation community
 - FNHA has funded Nuu-Chah-Nulth Tribal Council (NTC) for a harm reduction mobile van to provide outreach with expanded service hours; services will include drug testing; accessing harm reduction supplies; assisting with detox/treatment application; and cultural support uplifted with additional elders and peers
- The FNHA has coordinated with the Western Aboriginal Harm Reduction Society (WAHRS) to open an **episodic OPS** in the Downtown Eastside and is working on identifying other sites in BC for these projects, to be known as Raven’s Eye Sage Sites
- The FNHA is listening to First Nations families and communities to explore the **decriminalization of people who use substances**; guided by these conversations the FNHA will work with system partners to ensure First Nations priorities, perspectives and experiences influence discussions and decisions on decriminalization in BC
- The FNHA will also engage with communities to assess the need and preferences for **pharmaceutical alternative to toxic street drugs** by First Nations people who are at risk of overdose

Access to OAT

Number of FNHA Clients Dispensed OAT (Jan 2021 – February 2023)

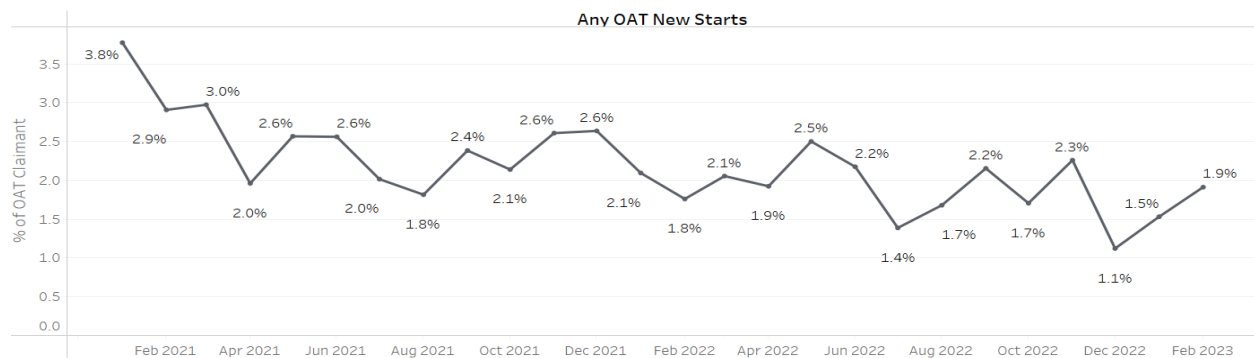


OAT is one of the recommended pharmacotherapy options to reduce opioid-use related harms and to support long-term recovery for persons with opioid use disorder. The medications include but are not limited to methadone, buprenorphine/naloxone (Suboxone), slow-release oral morphine (Kadian) and buprenorphine extended-release (Sublocade).

With the expansion of OAT initiatives throughout the province, the total number of FNHA clients who were dispensed any type of OAT covered by the FNHA pharmacy benefit plan has slightly increased to 2,614 persons in February 2023, compared to the previous month.

Methadone was the most commonly prescribed type of OAT among FNHA clients dispensed OAT in February 2023. 59.1% of FNHA clients dispensed any type of OAT under the FNHA health benefit plan in February 2023 were prescribed methadone, while 20.9% of were prescribed buprenorphine/naloxone (Suboxone), the recommended first-line therapy. 18.1% were dispensed slow-release oral morphine (Kadian), while a small percent were prescribed the injectable buprenorphine-extended release (Sublocade) intended for moderate to severe opioid-use disorder management. Note that some clients might be dispensed more than one type of OAT in a given month.

Percentage of FNHA Clients Dispensed OAT for the First Time through the FNHA Health Benefits Plan by Month



Of all 2,614 FNHA clients dispensed OAT in February 2023, 1.9% were dispensed OAT through the FNHA health benefits plan for the first time.

Naloxone Distribution

Naloxone is an opioid antagonist that is used in an emergency response situation to temporarily reverse the effects of life-threatening opioid overdose. It is available in injectable or nasal spray form and often is bundled with other supplies (such as gloves or a breathing mask) in a carrying case or kit. The nasal spray is provided by the FNHA through two routes: by way of community pharmacies to First Nations individuals and through bulk supply to communities and Indigenous service organizations:

- Through FNHA’s bulk ordering program, 795 nasal naloxone kits were distributed to First Nations and community organizations in February 2023, and another 441 doses of nasal naloxone were distributed to First Nations clients through community pharmacies. [FNHA Nasal Naloxone fact sheet](#)
- Additionally, 825 injectable naloxone kits were ordered by 165 First Nations sites or Friendship Centres in February 2023. Injectable naloxone is available for free in the province to anyone at

risk of an overdose or likely to witness one. For information on how to access and use an injectable naloxone kit, see [Toward the Heart](#)

Harm Reduction on FNHA.ca

For information about substance use, to get informed, and to support others, visit [Harm Reduction on FNHA.ca](#), which includes:

- [Get Help](#): Virtual Substance Use and Psychiatry Services; harm reduction services, including OPS/Raven's Eye Sites, naloxone (nasal naloxone and FNHA community bulk purchase), workshops including Not Just Naloxone, Decolonizing Substance Use, and Tackling Stigma, land-based healing programs, OAT, and drug testing
- [Get Informed](#): personal stories about overdose and harm reduction; FNHA harm reduction campaign; learning resources; news; FNHA's Framework for Action; FNHA toxic drug annual data releases; and [Indigenous treatment centres](#)
- [Support Others](#): Indigenous harm reduction; [Take-Home Naloxone](#) for the FNHA nasal naloxone programs; FNHA Indigenous Wellness Program; and learning resources for helping people who use substances

Latest News

- [Applications for International Overdose Awareness Day Grants Now Open](#). June 22, 2023.
- [Culture as Healing](#). June 20, 2023.
- [Participate in our Family Focus Groups](#). June 15, 2023.
- [Discussion Circles for First Nations Community Clinicians and Navigators](#). June 15, 2023.
- [National Day of Awareness for Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls](#). May 5, 2023.
- [Love, Patience and Understanding: The Wholistic Path to Healing and Recovery](#). May 3, 2023.
- [A Safety-first Approach to Healing Centres](#). May 2, 2023.
- [It's Mental Health Week \(May 1-7\)](#). May 1, 2023.
- [Supporting Peer Workers – the Need for Love](#). April 24, 2023.
- [National Addictions Awareness Week: All Paths Lead to Wellness](#). November 24, 2022.
- [National Addictions Awareness Week 2022: The Importance of a Caring Community](#). November 21, 2022.
- [New Project Recognizes Grief Experienced by People Who Have Lost a Loved One to Toxic Drugs](#). October 3, 2022.

Appendix: Data Sources and Definitions

BC Coroners Drug Toxicity Data

As defined by the BC Coroners Service (BCCS), “illicit drug overdoses include those involving street drugs (controlled and illegal: heroin, cocaine, MDMA, methamphetamine etc.), medications that were not prescribed to the deceased, combinations of the above with prescribed medications and those overdoses where the origin of the drug is not known. Both open and closed cases are included.” (BCCS, 2018).

BCCS operates in a live database and includes both open and closed cases. Thus, data are subject to change as investigations are completed and data is refreshed. Small changes in numbers of deaths are expected with every refresh.

First Nations–specific information is identified via linkage to the FNCF, a cohort of all individuals registered with Indigenous Services Canada (ISC) as of 2018 and living in BC, as well as their eligible descendants. Only persons identified as status First Nations are captured via linkage. First Nations people without status, Métis and Inuit persons are not captured in the above data.

BC Emergency Health Services (BCEHS) Paramedic-Attended Drug Poisonings

Identification of drug-poisoning records is based on paramedic impression codes as well as 911 dispatch codes or where naloxone was administered by a paramedic. Alcohol and prescription drug related overdoses are excluded.

The majority of drug poisoning events identified by BCEHS data are nonfatal; however, it is possible that some deaths are also captured (BCCDC, 2021). Paramedic-attended toxic drug events include all events where 911 was called and BCEHS paramedics responded. Drug poisonings reversed in community where paramedics were not called are not captured.

Linkages to the FNCF requires a PHN. When a PHN is unavailable, the FNHA is not able to identify whether the record was of a First Nations persons or not. In 2021, approximately 25 per cent of events did not have a PHN; in 2020, approximately 24 per cent of events did not have a PHN; and in 2019, approximately 18 per cent of events did not have PHN and were thus not linkable to the FNCF. Consequently, paramedic-attended drug poisonings are likely underestimated for First Nations people. Additionally, there is likely a greater underestimation for 2020 and 2021 compared to previous years due to higher numbers of events in which a PHN was not available in these years. BCEHS is able to recover some of the missing PHNs; however, this process takes time. The Ministry of Health is able to run an additional algorithm to recover PHNs for some of the records. This absence of data is expected to decline with time.

First Nations data includes only persons with status and their descendants. First Nations persons without status are not included.

FNHA Health Benefits OAT Data

OAT data comes from line-level claims data for pharmacy dispensations through the First Nations Health Benefits program. There are three sources of this data: the federal Non Insured Health Benefits (NIHB) program (up to Sep 15 2019), BC PharmaCare Plan W (since Sep 2017), and Pacific Blue Cross Parallel Plan W (since Sep 2019). As of August 2021, the majority (97.4%) of FNHA clients have been enrolled in Plan W.

All measures in this report are broken down by provider region, except for unique prescriber counts which are broken down by assumed prescriber region.