

Info-MADO

Newsletter on Reportable Diseases

Nunavik Department of Public Health

Overdose alert

By
Infectious-Diseases Team
Department of Public Health, Nunavik RBHSS

Report of severe overdoses linked to drug consumption

On May 9, 2022, the Nunavik Department of Public Health received a report of persons arriving at the hospital with signs and symptoms of opioid overdose with respiratory depression. This event occurred after the individuals consumed “purple powder.” The event is currently under investigation.

Street drugs under the name of “purple powder”, also called purple heroin, or " purp " are often based on fentanyl, an opioid, with or without etizolam, and may also contain carfentanil. Opioids consumption is associated with a high risk of death, especially for users who can be exposed unknowingly. A person overdosing on opioids may present the following symptoms: extreme drowsiness, snoring, myosis (pinpoint pupils), slow breathing and cyanosis (blue lips and nails). The symptoms progress to cardiopulmonary arrest and death.

Carfentanil is an opioid used by veterinarians for very large animals, such as elephants. Carfentanil is 100 times more potent than fentanyl. An amount the size of a grain of salt, or 20 micrograms, can be fatal to a person.

Etizolam is a benzodiazepine banned in Canada and whose toxicity is up to 10 times worse than that of diazepam (Valium). It causes drowsiness, which can go as far as loss of consciousness and respiratory depression. Naloxone does not reverse the effects of etizolam but is not harmful if given.

For carfentanil, fentanyl or etizolam, overdose risks are increased when taken with other nervous-system depressants, such as alcohol or other opioids.

Recommendations for clinicians:

- **Promptly report any suspected case of overdose to the Nunavik Department of Public Health:**
 - by calling the physician on duty for Public Health (toll-free at 1 855 964-2244 or, in case of problems with the toll-free number, 1 819 299-2990)
OR
 - by confidential fax (1 866 867-8026) with the overdose report form.
- **Inform people who use drugs:**
 - of the presence in Nunavik of “purple powder” or contaminated drugs;
 - of the increased risk of overdose with the concomitant consumption of other depressants (alcohol, GHB, benzo and other opioids);
 - that the risk of substance overdose increases with injection use;

VOL. 10 No 6
Jun 2022

P.O. Box 900
Kuujuuaq, Québec J0M 1C0
Tel.: 819 964-2222 / 1 844 964-2244
Confidential Fax: 1 866 867-8026



- to avoid consuming alone;
- when several people consume, avoid everyone consuming at the same time;
- to decrease the drug dose to test its effects;
- to call 9090 if anyone overdoses (the *Good Samaritan Drug Overdose Act* provides immunity from simple possession charges for those who call 9090 in the case of an overdose);
- naloxone is needed to reverse overdose effects. In case of an overdose, call 9090 for rapid, effective intervention.

For additional information on overdose symptoms or management, contact the *Centre antipoison du Québec* at 1 800 463-5060.

[For additional information on risks of opioid use, visit this link.](#)

A Nunavik Regional Action Plan for the Prevention of Opioid Overdoses 2019-2022 is available in your respective organizations. Below is some useful information concerning overdoses:

- There are 200 doses of naloxone IV available in each of the 14 communities of Hudson Bay and Ungava Bay, allowing two people to be kept alive for 48 hours in each community.
- Short training capsules dealing with opioid overdoses, intended for health professionals, are available to the personnel of the two health centers.
- A surveillance system for opioid overdoses by Public Health is implemented in the two health centers, to react quickly in the event of repeated overdoses observed by clinicians in the field.

In addition, naloxone nasal spray will be available to community workers and police officers.