

## **Alert**

# **Information Newsletter of the Nunavik Department of Public Health**

### Danger of poisoning: opioid overdoses

By:

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#### Overdose risk linked to opioid use

The Department of Public Health of the Nunavik Regional Board of Health and Social Services has been informed of a risk of overdose linked to the presence of a combination of depressants containing xylazine on the illicit-drug market in the Montréal region. This information is being shared with you because of the possible transit of substances between Montréal and Nunavik.

#### Presence of a combination of depressants containing xylazine on the illicit-drug market in Montréal

The Montréal Regional Department of Public Health (Montréal RDPH) has received confirmation of significant exposure to xylazine among drug users in Montréal. Such individuals could therefore be unknowingly exposed to risky drug combinations. Among the substances from the Montréal market tested in 2022, xylazine is primarily found in powder form (as well as tablets), generally in combination with fentanyl and/or benzodiazepines not legally sold in Canada. Xylazine is a sedative with analgesic and myorelaxant properties used in veterinary medicine. The combination with other depressants (e.g., opioids, benzodiazepines) increases the risk of overdose. During such poisoning, an individual could present the following symptoms: decreased heart rate, lowered blood pressure, respiratory difficulties that risk evolving into respiratory arrest, marked drowsiness, reduced or absent response to stimuli, hyperglycemia or myosis (contracted pupils). Long periods of altered states of consciousness have been reported.

In case of overdose, naloxone can reverse the effects of opioids but not those of xylazine and benzodiazepines. Given the similar effects of altered states of consciousness and respiratory depression, if an overdose is suspected, administration of naloxone is still recommended.

#### **Recommendations for clinicians**

The Department of Public Health is asking clinicians and interveners to be vigilant for the potential occurrence of overdoses among their patients who use drugs or non-prescription medications (e.g., pain or sleep medications) and encourages them to promote harm-reduction measures to prevent deaths among users:

- 1. If necessary, call the Québec poison-control centre at 1-800-463-5060.
- 2. Circulate information and provide advice on drug-use practices with reduced risks:
  - Avoid using drugs alone.



- When several individuals use drugs together, avoid using at the same time to ensure someone watches over the others.
- Reduce doses of a drug to test its effects.
- Be sure to have naloxone on hand in sufficient quantities and know how to administer it when an individual shows signs of overdose.
- Inform users of the *Good Samaritan Drug Overdose Act*: there is no risk, even if action is unnecessary. The *Good Samaritan Drug Overdose Act* ensures immunity from charges for simple possession for those who witness an overdose.
- Call 9090 in case of overdose.
- As needed, refer individuals with problems linked to opioid use to addiction-treatment services.
- 3. Offer to accompany individuals for free access to naloxone at the region's CLSCs.
- 4. Report any unusual case of poisoning without delay to the Department of Public Health, using the form for clinical reporting of overdoses:

#### Overdose reporting form for professionals Nunavik

The Department of Public Health asks health professionals to report any situation of opioid overdose, whether suspected or confirmed. The following situations should be reported:

- The overdose is presumed to be linked to opioids;
  - 0 01
- A high number of individuals have overdosed over a short time period;
  - o or
- The overdose symptoms are particularly severe;
  - o or
- Any other alarming situation linked to the circulation of opioids.

#### For reporting:

During office hours from 9:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m.:

surveillance.vigie.nrbhss@ssss.gouv.qc.ca

Outside office hours, before 9:00 a.m. or after 5:00 p.m.:

**Physician on duty** for public health at **1-855 964-2244** (toll free) or at **1-819 299-2990** (alternate number in case of problems with the toll-free number)

Our thanks to the Montréal RDPH for its contribution to the present alert.