

**Yukon
Coroner's
Service**

News Release

Update from Chief Coroner regarding recent deaths due to toxic illicit drugs

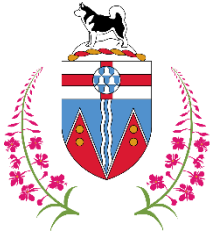
May 5, 2023 – The Yukon Coroner's Service confirms that eight deaths in the Yukon between April 7 and 27, 2023 were related to substance use. Since January 1, 2023, there have been a total of 11 substance use deaths, eight of which involved opioids. Toxic illicit drugs including cocaine, opioids and benzodiazepines continue to take lives in the Yukon, and alcohol is found to be a common contributor in some cases.

The Yukon has now recorded 85 opioid-related deaths since April of 2016.

Of the eight tragic deaths that have occurred between April 7 and 27, 2023:

- six occurred in Whitehorse and two in other Yukon communities;
- four of the deceased were female and four were male;
- four were members of Yukon First Nations;
- ages ranged between 22 and 52;
- four appear to have been using alone;
- one death was caused by cocaine poisoning;
- two deaths involved cocaine and alcohol intoxication;
- three deaths involved cocaine and fentanyl;
- one death involved cocaine, fentanyl and benzodiazepines in the form of etizolam and bromazolam; and
- one death is still pending toxicology results.

Bromazolam is a novel benzodiazepine that was first identified in illicit drugs in 2016. Little is currently known about the potency of this drug. However, it is expected to have similar potency to alprazolam, which is a prescription medication also known as Xanax, often used to manage anxiety disorders. Toxicity associated with alprazolam includes drowsiness, confusion, hypotension (low blood pressure) and tachycardia (racing heart rate). This is the first known finding of bromazolam in a death investigated by the Yukon Coroner's Service. Furthermore, etizolam has been seen in cases investigated by the Yukon Coroner's Service since 2021.



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What these findings show is that the source of these illicit drugs is inconsistent, and Yukoners need to be incredibly careful if they choose to use. The Yukon Coroner's Service urges caution to anyone who might be or might consider using illicit drugs. It is possible that there can be substances in the drugs that are not known to the user, and that one batch of the same drug sold can vary from the next. Please do not use alone. I encourage people to make use of the drug checking services available from Blood Ties Four Directions, the Outreach Van, and Emergency Medical Services.

Communicate with a friend about what substances you are using, and ensure they know who to call for help in an emergency. Treatment options are available, and many service providers in the Yukon are willing to support anyone affected by substance use.

Each one of these deaths is a tragedy and our communities continue to struggle with the grief and pain associated with the loss of life from the substance use health crisis. This is an incredibly difficult crisis to navigate that causes irreparable harm to our communities. It is devastating for everyone across the Yukon and continues to cause unnecessary pain. No part of our society is unaffected.

All Yukoners can take steps to address this, and we urge them to do so. It is important that we are there for one another and offer our supports to each other. Naloxone is a safe and effective way to reverse opioid overdose; for more information on how to obtain and use a naloxone kit, please visit Yukon.ca. This is a simple measure that all citizens and business owners can take to prevent fatal overdoses involving opioids.

Quote:

This substance use crisis continues to be horribly difficult and it is affecting all of us in the Yukon. These deaths are not only heartbreaking, but many are preventable. We must remain aware, and, most importantly, we all must work together to help each other as we grieve these losses across our territory. We must also remember to show our compassion, kindness and support to anyone struggling with substance use.

The Yukon Coroner's Service sends our deepest condolences to all the families and communities who continue to be so severely impacted by these tragic deaths.

Chief Coroner Heather Jones

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