

Cold Weather Advisory for housing service providers supporting people who experience homelessness

Environment Canada has issued winter weather advisories for several parts of British Columbia in the upcoming week. This includes Special Weather Statements, Snowfall Warnings, Freezing Rain Warnings, and Winter Storm Warnings.

These warnings will create difficult outdoor conditions such as freezing temperatures, icy road conditions and limited visibility during daytime. We expect these conditions to last for the next few days and will be affecting the weather during the day as well as night times.

What are the health effects of extreme cold weather?

Exposure to extreme cold weather can be harmful to our health. Some prominent health effects include:

- Wind Burn
 - Excessive dry skin, redness, soreness, itchiness
- Trench foot
 - Pain, numbness, leg cramps, swelling, blisters, ulcers, bleeding under the skin, gangrene
- Frost bite
 - Irritation, tingling and burning, discoloured skin, blistering, ulceration
- Hypothermia
 - Uncontrollable shivering, drowsiness or exhaustion, confusion, tremors, slurred speech, decrease pulse, cardiac arrest or coma (in severe cases)
- Chronic illnesses that can destabilize due to break in continuity of care or access to medicines
 - Asthma, chronic bronchitis, emphysema
 - Diabetes
 - Neurological conditions, such as seizure disorders
 - Opioid use disorder
 - Other chronic diseases
- Injuries
 - Slip and fall in icy conditions
 - Burns and thermal injuries in case people try to burn paper, wood, or coal to keep warm
 - Carbon monoxide poisoning

Who is at higher risk of health effects due to cold weather?

- People experiencing homelessness or unstably housed
- People living in alone
- People on certain medications
- People who work or do strenuous physical activities outdoors for long periods of time
- Infants and young children
- Older adults (Age 65 and over)
- People who have physical or mental disabilities

What should housing service providers do?

Housing service providers can take several steps:

Accept

- Continue to accept clients requiring shelter spaces through the extreme weather events
- Follow public health recommendations for COVID-19 prevention as far as possible while still accepting the clients

Aware

- Monitor news alerts for changing weather patterns
- Be aware of health effects of cold weather
- Watch for early warning signs of severe health effects

Assess

- Assess clients' needs for additional warming supports
- Enable clients to take appropriate precautions for winter hazards (e.g. provide additional layers of clothing, socks or shoes)

Alert

- Alert clients and those who support them that winter hazards are expected to occur, or exist
- Call 911 in case of hypothermia or frostbite are suspected

To learn more, visit Fraser Health [Healthy Winter Guide](#)

Overdose Risk around Holidays

Fraser Health would like to remind folks that people who use illicit substances continue to navigate a highly toxic drug supply.

After the tragic release of the number of loved ones lost in October and November, Fraser Health acknowledges that the currently illicit substances that are circulating are highly toxic and unpredictable.

Overdose events have occurred after using opioids, methamphetamine, ecstasy and cocaine. We are asking everyone to look out for each other as overdose numbers increase over the holiday period.

People are at a higher risk of overdose when:

- Use after a period of not using or reduced use
- Had a previous overdose
- Had a recent illness (including COVID-19)
- Multiple substances are used at the same time

Below is a collection of tips from experts, including people who use substances, on ways to reduce the risks of harm and death:

Precautions around Substances:

- **Store substances safely**, including medications, where they cannot be reached by others
- **Test the supply.** There are [many sites across Fraser Health](#) to access test strips to screen for fentanyl. Checking drugs for multiple substances with the FTIR machine is offered at [Starship Health Contact Centre](#) in New Westminster or [Get Your Drugs Tested](#) in Vancouver.

Be aware of toxicity:

- **Be aware that high levels of toxic fentanyl is present in circulating drug supply.**
- **Benzodiazepines are found in the drug supply.** We are seeing increasing presence of [nonmedical benzodiazepines](#). This increases the risk of drug poisoning and complicates overdose reversal. Intentional or unknown regular use of benzodiazepines can create tolerance and complicated withdrawal that needs medical management.

Reduce Harms from Substances:

- Use an Overdose Prevention Site (OPS) or Supervised Consumption Site (SCS) whenever possible.
- **Plan ahead.** Services may have reduced or different hours of operation over cold periods and the holidays. Plan and call ahead for supports people might need.
- **Stock up on harm reduction supplies and naloxone.** Many pharmacies remain open and distribute naloxone. Get your replacement kits and do not ration naloxone supply.
- **Do not use multiple substances at the same time.** Leave a couple of hours between using different substances (e.g. alcohol and drugs).
- **Use the [Lifeguard App](#)** if you are using alone.
- **Find a [site](#) that distributes harm reduction supplies or naloxone.**

Supporting people who use drugs:

- **Check on friends, neighbours and loved ones.** Cold snaps may be associated with increased fatal opioid overdoses.
- **Help people access tools to enhance safety.** This will look different for different people. Know where to find [overdose prevention services](#) and [episodic witnessed consumption](#) to help keep people safe. Ask people what they might need to stay safer, acknowledging that there may be barriers in accessing some of the regular places that offer naloxone or harm reduction supplies.
- **Know the [signs of overdose](#) and [how to respond](#), including giving breaths.**
- **Call 9-1-1.** Anytime someone is not responsive, it is a **medical emergency**.