

Canada province declares fentanyl overdoses a public health emergency

April 15 2016

A spike in the number of fentanyl overdose deaths in Canada's westernmost British Columbia province has prompted authorities to declare a public health emergency.

"The recent surge in overdoses is a huge concern for us," said British Columbia Health Minister Terry Lake, who declared the emergency on Thursday.

The powerful painkiller was found to be responsible in 64 out of 201 illicit [drug overdose deaths](#) in the Pacific coast province in the first three months of 2016, he said.

The proportion of overdose deaths in which fentanyl was detected has steadily increased from five percent in 2012 to approximately 31 percent last year and persisted through the first three months of 2016.

Lake warned that without immediate action taken to stem this tide, total British Columbia [overdose deaths](#) could rise to a record 600 to 800 this year, from 474 in 2015.

Fentanyl, which is up to 50 times more potent than heroin and up to 100 times more powerful than morphine, is a synthetic [opioid](#) usually prescribed for patients with advanced cancer pain.

But increasingly street drugs have been found to be laced with it. A similar opioid crisis has been reported in other parts of Canada and in

the neighboring United States.

In Sacramento, California investigators said they believe a version of the drug was produced in China and smuggled into the United States through Mexico.

In order to tackle the problem in Canada, Lake said health officials need real-time information on fentanyl-linked overdoses in order to better target outreach, bad drug warnings, awareness campaigns and distribution of naloxone—which blocks opiate receptors in the nervous system, and is used to treat opioid overdoses.

Hundreds of British Columbia firefighters and pharmacists, as well as opioid users and their families and friends have so far been trained to use naloxone.

Lake said the program would be quickly expanded.

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