

# Patterns of Medication and Healthcare Use among People who Died of an Opioid-Related Toxicity During the COVID-19 Pandemic in Ontario

The COVID-19 pandemic has led to a significant rise in accidental/unintentional opioid related deaths. Understanding patterns of healthcare use among people who died of an opioid related toxicity during the pandemic can help identify opportunities for support and prevention.

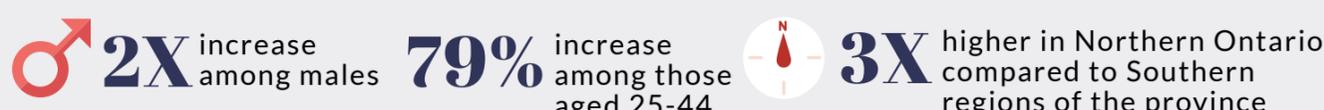
## Timelines Studied

**Prior to the pandemic** (March to December 2019)  
1,017 opioid related deaths

**During the pandemic** (March to December 2020)  
1,808 opioid related deaths

## Demographics

Rates of opioid-related death during the pandemic:



## Opioid Involvement

Deaths increasingly involved **only non-pharmaceutical opioids** from the unregulated drug supply



During the pandemic, only

**1 in 10** deaths involved solely pharmaceutical opioids



Rx

**1 in 4** people had a recent opioid prescription prior to death



Almost half of these individuals were prescribed **methadone**

### Methadone

was the most common pharmaceutical opioid that contributed to death. Among these deaths:

**55%** also involved **fentanyl** **1 in 3** people had **not** been recently dispensed methadone

**Hydromorphone** was a direct contributor in a similar number of deaths across pandemic periods, but declined from



## Other drug involvement

**3 in 5** opioid toxicity deaths had a **stimulant** as a direct contributor. These involved mainly:

**cocaine** and **methamphetamines**  
**44%** **27%**

**5X** increase in the detection of **non-pharmaceutical benzodiazepines** among opioid toxicity deaths



**Etizolam** (a non-pharmaceutical benzodiazepine not available by prescription in Canada) makes up over **90%** of these deaths

## Recent healthcare encounters

Health service use among people at risk of overdose is high, but declined during the pandemic

**1 in 2** had a healthcare encounter in the **30 days** prior to death

**1 in 4** had a healthcare encounter in the **7 days** prior to death

Specifically, in the **7 days** prior to death:

**18%** had an **outpatient visit** **7%** had a **primary care visit** **6%** had an **emergency department (ED) visit**



Among people actively treated with **methadone** at time of death,

**2 in 3** had an **outpatient visit** in the **7 days** prior to death

**2 in 3** deaths occurred among people with a prior healthcare encounter related to **opioid use disorder (OUD)**

only **1 in 3** people who died had accessed **opioid agonist therapy** in the past 5 years, and

**1 in 10** in the past 30 days

**89%** of people who died had a **mental health-related** healthcare encounter (including OUD) in the past 5 years

There was a significant increase in individuals with previous outpatient visits related to **psychotic disorders** during the pandemic



**1 in 4** had a history of **chronic pain**

**2 in 3** of these individuals also had a healthcare encounter related to **OUD**

## Focused analysis: People experiencing homelessness

The pandemic has had a disproportionate impact on people experiencing homelessness

**2X** increase in the number of deaths among people experiencing homelessness  
**121** pre-pandemic to **293** during the pandemic

**1 in 6** deaths during the pandemic occurred among people experiencing homelessness

**1 in 4** had a healthcare encounter in the **7 days** prior to death. Specifically:

**14%** had an **outpatient visit** **5%** had a **primary care visit** **10%** had an **ED visit**

In the past 5 years:

**3 in 4** had a prior healthcare encounter related to OUD  
**93%** had a mental health related healthcare encounter



For more information

