

NEWS RELEASE

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
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Stay informed, stay safer: Island Health launches text alert system for drug-poisoning advisories

Island-wide — People can now be alerted via text message about drug-poisoning advisories in the Island Health region thanks to an innovative partnership.

Anyone can join the system anonymously by texting JOIN to 253787, and subscribers will receive text alerts when Island Health distributes drug-poisoning overdose advisories to specific regions. These advisories share information about increases in toxic drug poisonings in the Island Health region and provide tips for safer drug use. Alerts featuring other public-health related information may also be available in the future.

"Separating people from the toxic drug supply is one of the most important ways we can prevent drug poisonings and death," said Jennifer Whiteside, minister of Mental Health and Addictions. "This new alert system is one more critical tool available as the province expands harm reduction measures, while connecting people to lifesaving supports."

"This initiative lets us share important information about drug poisonings quickly with communities across Vancouver Island," says Keva Glynn, Island Health's executive lead for Mental Health and Substance Use. "It's another way to help people stay safer and informed."

The need for text-based alerting is driven by an increase in deaths due to the toxic illicit drug supply in B.C. The system was developed by the BC Centre for Disease Control (BCCDC) and the Office of Virtual Health at the Provincial Health Services Authority, in partnership with regional health authorities. Island Health is the third health authority in B.C. to launch the system; Interior Health and Fraser Health also introduced it earlier this year. It will continue gradually expanding to other regions of the province.

"The alerts system is now providing vital information to people who use substances and community partners in Interior, Fraser and now Island Health," says Dr. Alexis Crabtree, public

health physician, substance use and harm reduction with BCCDC's Public Health Response team. "Until people who use substances have access to a regulated drug supply, this is one way people can quickly receive information to reduce drug poisoning events and deaths."

"I think this service will benefit many, including those who use substances and their loved ones," says Beth Haywood, a peer project coordinator at Island Health. "It will help clients and peers stay aware about what's happening in their communities."

In 2021, there were 2,224 deaths due to the toxic illicit drug supply. This was the highest-ever number of annual overdose deaths in B.C. since a public health emergency was declared in 2016, and a 26 per cent increase compared to 2020, which previously set the record. In the first 10 months of this year, preliminary reporting indicates that at least 1,827 British Columbians have died due to illicit drugs.

Please visit [Toward the Heart](#) for more information about the alerting service.

For information on drug-checking services to support Island Health communities and prevent drug-poisonings, please visit [Overdose Prevention Services | Island Health](#) to find out where drugs can be tested in a safe and stigma-free environment.

For general information on how to get help, be involved and be informed, visit [stopoverdosebc.ca](#).

About Island Health:

Island Health provides health care and support services to more than 860,000 people on Vancouver Island, the islands in the Salish Sea and the Johnstone Strait, and mainland communities north of Powell River. With more than 27,000 staff and over 2,900 physician partners, 1,000 volunteers, and the dedicated support of foundations and auxiliaries, Island Health delivers a broad range of health services, including: public health services, primary health care, home and community care, mental health and addictions services, acute care in hospitals, and much more across a huge, geographically diverse region.

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