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Multnomah County Health Department warns of fatal heroin overdoses

A handful of overdose deaths in the last few weeks, along with a steady rise in heroin-related deaths over the past year, have raised concerns among county health officials. State heroin overdoses are up 32% from last year, increasing from 89 deaths to 118 deaths. Sixty-six of the 118 deaths were in Multnomah County.

“Heroin overdoses occur in cycles. According to data recently released by the Oregon Medical Examiner, we are on an upswing in several Oregon counties,” says Multnomah County Public Health Officer Dr. Gary Oxman.

Overdoses pose a threat to the lives and health of opiate users and are preventable. There are several factors that can increase a person’s risk of an overdose, including:

- Drug strength – heroin can vary in purity. At this time it appears the heroin sold in Multnomah County is quite pure, and therefore potentially stronger;
- Combining drugs (heroin with fentanyl, methadone, morphine, or benzodiazepines, etc.);
- Using after a period of abstinence (including after time spent in jail, drug treatment, or voluntary abstinence, even after a short period of time);
- Using drugs alone, resulting in no one being around to help the overdose victim (this happens often when a person relapses and feels shame about relapsing); and
- Experiencing a period of depression or suicidal thoughts.

Multnomah County Health Department, along with community-based partners, is taking two actions to respond to this situation: 1) increasing overdose prevention work with current clients, and 2) working to improve surveillance that is vital to detecting emerging trends and guiding long-term prevention efforts.

Dr. Gary Oxman explains, “Our primary interest in this kind of situation is to save lives. If you see someone who has overdosed, please call 9-1-1. We want to prevent these deaths. Each person who dies is someone’s loved one – a brother, sister, mother, father, child, or best friend.”

For more information on drug treatment and prevention:

<http://www.orphnership.org/>

1-800-923-help (4357) or 211

For more information on reducing the risks of overdoses:

<http://www.harmreduction.org/article.php?list=type&type=51>

For more information on Oregon drug-related deaths:

<http://www.oregon.gov/OSP/SME/index.shtml>

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