

# The bare bones of fentanyl and opioid use in Halton

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A staff report to Halton Region's Health and Social Services committee last week shows a near doubling of opioid-related hospital visits and overdoses in the region since 2006, but still represents only half the provincial rate.

Opioids are a class of drug that falls into both the legal and illegal drug trade. Opiates such as street heroin and morphine are derived from the poppy plant, while synthetic derivatives like hydrocodone, oxycodone and fentanyl are also used to treat pain.

A January report from the CBC about drug overdoses in B.C. in 2016 indicated an epidemic year-over-year increase in overdose deaths of 80 per cent over the previous year. Many of those overdoses have been attributed to fentanyl which, according to Halton police, is 100 times more potent than morphine and 40 times more potent than heroin.

While the report concedes it is impossible to assess all opioid use in the region, Halton Health is able to glean some insight from emergency room and hospitalization statistics readily available to them.

According to the report released March 21 Halton Region emergency departments (EDs) saw an average of 129 emergency room visits per 100,000 residents for behavioral issues related to opioids and 96 for overdoses per year between 2013-15. Those visits resulted in 60 hospitalizations annually over that time, including 22 stays for behavioral issues and 38 due to overdoses at a rate per 100,000 residents.

Between 2006 and 2015, there was an approximate doubling of rates for opioid-related ED visits in both Halton and Ontario. Since the rates started lower in Halton, Halton is only now reaching the level of where Ontario was 10 years ago. The rates of opioid-related hospitalizations follow a

similar trend, explained the report.

Digging a little deeper, the report found the rate of opioid-related ED visits was approximately 1.6 times higher in males than females. The report also found the highest number of visits between 2013-15 came from the 25-44 age group with 72 average annual visits per 100,000 residents, followed by the 15-24 demographic with 64. Those aged 45-64 and 75-plus both saw an average of 33 visits, with the 65-74 age group rounding out the field with 27 per 100,000 people.

The Office of the Chief Coroner of Ontario reported an average of 13 deaths per year involving opioid toxicity between 2011-15, two of which are associated with fentanyl on an annual basis. In total, Halton sees approximately 2,800 residents die annually from all causes.

An officer and investigator with the Halton Regional Police Service (HRPS)'s Integrated Drugs, Guns and Gangs Unit, who can't be identified due to the sensitive nature of their investigations, reported similar observations within the region's policing circles.

According to the officer, the proliferation of fentanyl remains a serious and growing problem all across Canada and Halton is no exception.

(Fentanyl) is definitely a problem, and not just in Halton, it's obviously a global issue, said the officer. Maybe three or four years ago when pharmacies and the College of Pharmacology stopped making oxycontin. So with that, obviously all these users who are addicted to opiates out there had to find something else.

That's when heroin started becoming more prevalent. So with heroin, the guys are always looking for that better high and then fentanyl started coming out on the market and over the last two or three years it's really started to increase quite significantly.

It seems like it's starting out west. I'm sure you are aware of the issues in B.C. and everything, but it's slowly making its way



Last November, members of the Halton Regional Police drug and morality bureau displayed the drugs, guns and cash seized in six raids on homes and businesses in both Burlington and Hamilton. This was Halton police's largest seizure to date of the drug fentanyl with one pound seized.

Graham Paine/Metroland News Service

east. I know Waterloo has had a lot of issues with fentanyl and other stronger opioids, added the officer.

Unlike less potent forms, fentanyl often referred to as synthetic heroin is so dangerous because it can kill in amounts as small as a grain of sand, and police say it is being mixed with regular street heroin to

increase the high.

In Halton specifically, I'd probably describe it as a modest increase (in usage) over the last two years, and just recently we've noticed that it's kind of levelled out a little bit. It hasn't really been increasing over the last six months, they said.

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