

**For Immediate Release | May 14, 2019**

## **Research study evaluates safety of take-home drug checking kits**

Vancouver, BC – Vancouver Coastal Health (VCH) and the BC Centre for Disease Control (BCCDC) are collaborating on a new research project providing people who use substances with take-home drug checking kits to determine if people can use them safely on their own.

“We know using drugs alone presents a significant risk amidst a toxic, unpredictable and illegal drug supply that is taking three to four lives every single day,” said Judy Darcy, Minister of Mental Health and Addictions. “Drug checking is an important tool in our toolbox and through this research project we can learn more about how to keep people safer and help them find a pathway to hope.”

“We know that most people dying from overdoses die while using alone,” said Dr. Mark Lysyshyn, Medical Health Officer, VCH. “We’re hoping that giving people the opportunity to check their drugs for fentanyl on their own could help them make safer choices and save lives.”

Clients will receive five free test strips, with instructions, to take home so they can check whether their substances possibly contain fentanyl, the toxin contaminating the illegal drug supply, which was responsible for approximately 87 per cent of illicit drug overdose deaths in 2018 in B.C. The take-home kits are available at select overdose prevention (OPS) and supervised consumption sites (SCS) in Vancouver.

The research study will compare results of take-home drug checking with drug checking services already being offered at VCH sites using trained technicians. Researchers will evaluate the fentanyl positivity rates from the take-home checks compared with rates that technicians get during the same time frame. The study will help determine whether take-home drug checking kits can be effectively used outside of a health care facility without staff oversight.

Outside of this pilot, the strips are available to people at OPS and SCS and certain community sites, for those consuming drugs at these sites. Results showing how many samples checked contain fentanyl are posted regularly at the sites to inform clients.

“Using the test strips will allow people to identify if there is fentanyl in their drugs so they can make informed decisions about how to reduce their risk of overdose,” said Dr. Jane Buxton, Medical Lead for Harm Reduction, BCCDC. “Although the test strips do not detect all fentanyl analogues, they are another tool that we can use to engage with people who use substances and discuss with them how they can reduce harms. After testing their drugs, people may choose to use less, to use with a friend, or not use the drug at all. And, of course, key to staying safe even with access to test strips is to be trained to respond to an overdose and have a naloxone kit with you at all times.”

The test strips were originally developed to check urine for the presence of fentanyl but in July 2016 in light of the overdose crisis, VCH pioneered the use of the strips to check the drugs themselves for fentanyl. A small amount of a drug is mixed with a few drops of water, the test strip is inserted into the solution, and a positive or negative for fentanyl is

revealed within seconds.

Currently clients voluntarily check their drugs at VCH sites an average of 500 times each month. Since many fatal illicit drug overdoses occur in private residences, and when the person is alone, a take-home drug checking kit could help more people.

"Using the test strips has shown that when people get a positive fentanyl result they are more likely to reduce their dose and less likely to overdose," said Dr. Lysyshyn. "So we know that drug checking can help people make safer, more informed choices, and can prevent overdose deaths."

Interior Health is also participating in the pilot. The take-home kits are available at several sites including in Kamloops, Cranbrook, Merritt, Nelson, Kelowna, Penticton and Vernon.

VCH is responsible for the delivery of \$3.3 billion in community, hospital and residential care to more than one million people in communities including Richmond, Vancouver, the North Shore, Sunshine Coast, Sea to Sky corridor, Powell River, Bella Bella and Bella Coola.

The **BC Centre for Disease Control**, a part of the Provincial Health Services Authority, provides public health leadership through surveillance, detection, treatment, prevention and consultation services. The Centre provides diagnostic and treatment services for people with diseases of public health importance, and analytical and policy support to all levels of government and health authorities. The BCCDC also provides health promotion and prevention services to reduce the burden of chronic disease, preventable injury and environmental health risks. For more, visit <http://www.bccdc.ca> or follow us on Twitter @CDCofBC.