



Thursday 3 October 2024

New report shows 547 Victorians died from overdose in 2023

A new report released today by the Coroners Court of Victoria, shows that 547 Victorians died from overdose in 2023. The figures are very close to the 550 overdose deaths recorded in 2022 — which was the highest annual number of overdoses deaths recorded in the past decade.

The report, *Victorian Overdose Deaths 2014–2023*, is the first release of the 2023 full year Victorian overdose data and provides an analysis of demographics and trends.

Key findings in the report include:

- Men are on average twice as likely as women to die from overdose, and people aged between 35 and 54 are most at risk.
- Metropolitan Melbourne accounts for approximately three-quarters of overdose deaths.
- In 2023, a majority (71.5%) of overdose deaths involved multiple drugs.
- In 2023, the five top contributing drugs to overdose deaths were diazepam (213 deaths), heroin (204 deaths), methamphetamine (164 deaths), alcohol (153 deaths) and pregabalin (78 deaths).
- From 2014–23, pharmaceutical drugs were the most frequent contributors to Victorian overdose deaths, though the annual proportion of overdose deaths in which they played a contributory role declined over time, from 82.2% in 2014 to 69.3% in 2023.
- Alcohol-involved overdose deaths have been relatively steady between 2017 and 2023, contributing on average to approximately 29% of overdose deaths per year.
- From 2014–23 the proportion of Victorian overdose deaths involving illegal drugs increased, from 41.3% in 2014 to 59% in 2023.
- In 2023, heroin-involved overdose deaths decreased slightly, with 204 deaths in 2023, compared to 230 in 2022. However, heroin remains the highest contributing illegal drug to overdose deaths in Victoria.
- Heroin-involved overdose deaths vary substantially from year to year amongst local government areas, with the exception of Yarra, where heroin-involved overdose deaths have been consistently elevated.
- New psychoactive substances (NPS) — a group of highly potent drugs designed to mimic the effects of other drugs — remain an emerging concern. There were 42 NPS-involved overdose deaths in 2023, compared to 46 in 2022. Prior to 2023, there was a steady year-on-year increase in NPS-involved overdose deaths since 2019.
- NPS benzodiazepines were the most frequent contributing NPS category in 2023, as well as across the decade more generally.

CONTINUES OVER PAGE



- During 2023, the second most frequent contributing NPS category was opioids, with nitazenes being the predominant type of NPS opioids that contributed to Victorian overdose deaths in both 2022 and 2023. Coroners have noted the increased number of deaths involving nitazenes, particularly in circumstances where the nitazenes were sold to the deceased as other drugs such as heroin, oxycodone or MDMA.
- The annual number of methamphetamine-involved overdose deaths in Victoria more than tripled between 2014 (53 deaths) and 2023 (164 deaths). A majority of these deaths involved other drugs (84.5%) rather than methamphetamine alone (15.5%).
- Most overdose deaths are unintentional. In 2023, 395 of the 547 overdose deaths were unintentional, 114 were intentional and in 38 cases intent was unable to be determined based on the evidence available at the time of coding.
- Overdose is generally a more prevalent suicide method among women than men. From 2019-2023, 32.5% of overdose deaths amongst women were due to intentional self-harm, while only 13.5% of overdose deaths amongst men were intentional.

In Victoria, all deaths from suspected non-natural causes, including suspected overdoses, are required to be reported to the Coroners Court of Victoria. Suspected overdoses are recorded by the Court in the Victorian Overdose Deaths Register (VODR), which is the data source for this report.

Victoria's coroners regularly make use of the overdose deaths data to develop prevention-focused insights into issues as diverse as how doctors coordinate patient care; the regulation of certain prescription drugs; and the need for greater awareness around emerging illegal drugs.

The Court also shares data from the VODR with government and health agencies to inform their work in reducing drug-harms.

Quotes from the Victorian State Coroner, Judge John Cain:

"It is deeply troubling that 547 Victorians lost their lives to overdose last year."

"These deaths are preventable and we must strengthen our public health response and increase access to supports and treatment."

"Drug-related harms are complex and are driven by a variety of factors including changes in drug use, availability and regulation."

"That is why coronial data is so integral to understanding how best to target resources and save lives."

A copy of the report can be accessed here:

<https://coronerscourt.vic.gov.au/victorian-overdose-deaths-2014-2023>