



Preliminary Post-Mortem Positive Drug Screening Fact Sheet

New policy

Beginning on September 16, 2015, the Rhode Island Department of Health (RI DOH) will post weekly updates on the number of preliminary post-mortem positive drug screenings in Rhode Island.

These preliminary drug screening data will be released in addition to the weekly updates RI DOH currently makes for confirmed accidental drug-related overdose deaths. It is important to note the differences between these two sets of data.

What are preliminary post-mortem drug screenings?

Preliminary post mortem drugs screenings are initial tests for the presence of potentially toxic substances in the blood. The screening tests for 16 different substances and they are conducted on **every** decedent that is the subject of an examination by the Office of the State Medical Examiners. These tests are usually completed within a matter of days.

What preliminary post-mortem positive drug screenings do and do not show us

Preliminary post-mortem positive screening data indicate whether the decedent tested positive for any of the 16 substances screened for. RI DOH reports the results as either being positive for an opioid(s), a substance(s) that was not an opioid, or both an opioid and a non-opioid.

Because these tests are run on all deaths investigated by the Office of State Medical Examiners, and we release all positive results, the data are not limited to those people who died because of an overdose. The positive results also include those people who died with a substance in their systems but did not die because of it (e.g. people taking medication in an appropriate, prescribed manner).

To confirm that a death was caused by a drug overdose, a pathologist uses final toxicology reports and other information (e.g. from medical records, the scene of death) to make a determination. This process takes between two and three months to complete. Once this process is completed, RI DOH posts those as "Confirmed Accidental Drug-Related Overdose Deaths".

How positive preliminary post-mortem drug screening data can be useful

These data are readily available, objective, and standardized. The data show what substances are being seen in decedents, which can be useful to law enforcement and the recovery community. We know that not all of these positive results turn out to be

drug-overdose deaths (on average fewer than half), but it is the only preliminary information available within a few days of a death.

Schedule for release of preliminary post-mortem positive drug screening results and confirmed drug-overdose death data

Weekly:

- Both numbers are updated online at <http://www.health.ri.gov/data/drugoverdoses> and <http://www.health.ri.gov/data/drugscreenings> and emailed to members of Governor Raimondo's Drug Overdose Prevention and Intervention Task Force
- Preliminary post-mortem positive drug screening results are broken down by three categories of the type of substance found in a person's system (opioids, non-opioids, and both)
- The confirmed numbers represent the accidental drug-related overdose deaths that have been determined by the Medical Examiners Office through final toxicology testing. These tests take up to three months to complete. Numbers of confirmed accidental drug-related overdose deaths are provisional for three to six months, on average.