

FENTANYL



Fentanyl is a synthetic opioid pain reliever. It is many times more powerful than other opioids and is approved for treating severe pain, typically advanced cancer pain.¹ Illegally made and distributed fentanyl has been on the rise in several states.

What is fentanyl?

Pharmaceutical fentanyl is a synthetic opioid, approved for treating severe pain, typically advanced cancer pain.¹ It is 50 to 100 times more potent than morphine. It is prescribed in the form of transdermal patches or lozenges and can be diverted for misuse and abuse in the United States.

However, most recent cases of fentanyl-related harm, overdose, and death in the U.S. are linked to illegally made fentanyl.² It is sold through illegal drug markets for its heroin-like effect. It is often mixed with heroin and/or cocaine as a combination product—with or without the user's knowledge—to increase its euphoric effects.

Deaths involving illicitly manufactured fentanyl on the rise

Rates of overdose deaths involving synthetic opioids other than methadone, which includes fentanyl and fentanyl analogs, increased over 16% from 2018 to 2019. Overdose deaths involving synthetic opioids were nearly 12 times higher in 2019 than in 2013. More than 36,000 people died from overdoses involving synthetic opioids in 2019.³ The latest provisional drug overdose death counts through May 2020 suggest an acceleration of overdose deaths during the COVID-19 pandemic.⁴

50 TO 100 TIMES MORE POTENT THAN MORPHINE

WHAT CAN BE DONE?

The increase in overdose deaths highlights the need to ensure people most at risk of overdose can access care, as well as the need to expand prevention and response activities. CDC issued a Health Alert Network Advisory to medical and public health professionals, first responders, harm reduction organizations, and other community partners recommending the following actions as appropriate based on local needs and characteristics:

- ✓ Expand distribution and use of naloxone and overdose prevention education.
- ✓ Expand awareness about, access to, and availability of treatment for substance use disorders.
- ✓ Intervene early with individuals at highest risk for overdose.
- ✓ Improve detection of overdose outbreaks to facilitate more effective response.

SOURCES:

¹ Algren D, Monteilh C, Rubin C, et al. Fentanyl-associated fatalities among illicit drug users in Wayne County, Michigan (July 2005–May 2006). *Journal Of Medical Toxicology: Official Journal of the American College Of Medical Toxicology* [serial online]. March 2013; 9(1):106-115.

² Department of Justice, Drug Enforcement Administration, DEA Investigative Reporting, January 2015.

³ Mattson CL, Tanz LJ, Quinn K, Kariisa M, Patel P, Davis NL. Trends and Geographic Patterns in Drug and Synthetic Opioid Overdose Deaths – United States, 2013–2019. *MMWR Morb Mortal Wkly Rep* 2021;70:202–207.

⁴ Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. CDC Health Alert Network Advisory: Increase in Fatal Drug Overdoses Across the United States Driven by Synthetic Opioids Before and During the COVID-19 Pandemic. CDCHAN-00438, 2020 Dec 14.



FOR MORE INFORMATION

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