

Fentanyl: Advisory for Saskatchewan Health Care Providers (November 2016)

Illicit high dose fentanyl is being marketed as heroin and other substances

What is fentanyl?

Fentanyl is a synthetic drug that is 50-100 times more potent than other opioids. It is a legal drug prescribed by physicians to control severe pain and for some medical procedures; it can be safely used in those circumstances. However because of its strength, the dose must be very carefully monitored to avoid accidental overdose.

Sometimes fentanyl is used illegally and not received from a licensed prescriber, or it is not used properly. This is when using the drug becomes very dangerous; it can slow down a person's breathing, lead to a coma and even cause death.

From 2010 to 2015, there has been a progressive, province wide increase in the number of illicit drug overdose deaths in which fentanyl was detected, either alone or in combination with other drugs. Illegally produced fentanyl or diverted prescriptions have been found in various health regions throughout Saskatchewan.

The Saskatchewan Office of the Chief Coroner reports that there were 91 illicit drug overdose deaths involving opioids in 2015. Preliminary data suggests that fentanyl was detected in approximately 24 per cent of those deaths.

What does street fentanyl look like?

Police have found illegally manufactured fentanyl being sold in:

- pill form as fake oxycodone or other club drugs such as gamma-hydroxybutyrate (GHB), ketamine, or MDMA (ecstasy);
- powder form such as heroin or fentanyl; and
- powder form mixed into other drugs such as cocaine, crystal meth or marijuana.

Pills or powders containing illegally produced fentanyl are especially dangerous because there is no quality control or regulated manufacturing process. These drugs have variable potency. Even pills produced in the same batch may have minimal-to-lethal levels of fentanyl. The drugs may also contain other lethal contaminants.

Prescription fentanyl can also be diverted to the street where patches are ingested orally or extracted for injection. A fentanyl patch has a highly concentrated dose and therefore any tampering is dangerous and can be fatal.

For these reasons, illicit fentanyl use is particularly risky for people who have never used opioids or for people who may mistakenly use fentanyl thinking it is something else. These users can be in **danger of dying** even with their first use of fentanyl.

Use caution when handling fentanyl as it can be absorbed through the skin or mucous membranes. Avoid touching your eyes, nose or mouth, as even a small amount can cause serious adverse reactions, including death.

Is it safe for patients/clients to take fentanyl if it has been prescribed by a physician?

Yes, if it is used as prescribed. However, a person must be cautious if other substances are also being used that could suppress breathing (e.g. alcohol, benzodiazepines) or if that person is also taking non-prescription drugs.

According to *The Canadian Guideline for Safe and Effective Use of Opioids*, fentanyl should not be prescribed to opioid naïve patients.

Can fentanyl be detected in a urine drug screen?

Fentanyl is a synthetic opioid and most conventional urine drug screens testing for opioids are unable to detect fentanyl. However, fentanyl-specific urine screens are available for use by some health care providers. All urine drug screens routinely sent to the Saskatchewan Disease Control Laboratory are tested for both fentanyl and norfentanyl (a fentanyl metabolite).

What are the signs and symptoms of a fentanyl overdose?

Early signs of a fentanyl overdose include:

- “pinpoint” pupils;
- trouble walking or talking;
- bluish coloured and/or cold and clammy skin;
- a slow heartbeat;
- trouble breathing or slow, shallow breathing (depressed respiratory rate of 10-12 per minute) or snoring;
- seizures; and
- severe sleepiness, stupor or coma.

Does a fentanyl overdose differ from other opioids?

No; the signs and symptoms of a fentanyl overdose are indistinguishable from overdoses of other opioids. All affect the central nervous system and basic life functions such as breathing, temperature and consciousness. Naloxone/Narcan is a drug used to counter the effects of opioids especially in overdoses.

What should I do if I suspect a patient/client has unknowingly taken drugs containing fentanyl or if a person is experiencing signs of overdose?

If you feel it is a medical emergency, call 911 immediately. Call HealthLine (811) to obtain information about symptoms as well as health support and information.

What should I tell at-risk patients/clients?

Health care providers should caution people who are at risk of witnessing or experiencing an overdose about the availability of dangerous or toxic opioids on the street. When communicating this message to people who use illegal substances, care should be taken to avoid terms such as “strong” or “more powerful” which may actually increase drug-seeking behaviors.

Messages for your patients/clients could include:

- Know the signs and symptoms of an overdose, and call 911 immediately if they suspect this. (See “signs and symptoms of a fentanyl overdose”).
- If it is safe to do so, remove fentanyl pills from the person’s mouth or patches on their skin so the drug does not continue to be absorbed into the body. If possible, stay with the person until medical help arrives.
- While we advise against using illegal drugs, people who do use these drugs should be sure to:
 - » not use alone;
 - » start with a small amount;

- » know that mixing substances, including alcohol, increases the risk of overdose; and
- » have help readily available.
- Illegal fentanyl in pill and powder form may look identical to, and be sold as heroin or oxycodone.
- Individuals who use heroin or oxycodone may mistakenly take fentanyl. They are at greater risk of an overdose.
- Fentanyl made in unregulated laboratories can be far more toxic than pharmaceutical grade fentanyl.

Who can I contact if I suspect someone is selling fentanyl?

To report illicit activity associated with fentanyl use you may contact Saskatchewan Crime Stoppers.



Why are you providing this information now?

Given the extreme potency of fentanyl and the increase in fentanyl-related deaths, it is important to warn people who use these drugs about the increased danger, especially as they may be unaware of what they are taking.

Who can patients/clients contact if they need help regarding drug use?

Encourage patients/clients to contact their local Addictions/Mental Health Services office, doctor or other health care provider if they would like to connect with alcohol/drug services. To locate services near you:

- Visit www.saskatchewan.ca/addictions.
- Visit HealthLine Online at healthlineonline.ca.
- Call HealthLine at 811. Specially trained staff are available to provide mental health and addictions crisis support, in a safe and confidential manner.



Saskatchewan Crime Stoppers is 100% anonymous and does not subscribe to call display nor are your calls traced or recorded. Web and Text Tips are encrypted. Call Crime Stoppers at 1-800-222-TIPS (8477), text TIP206 and your message to CRIMES (274637), or you can submit a tip online at www.saskcrimestoppers.com where you can also view other unsolved crimes.

NOTE: This material is for information only and should not replace advice from an Addictions or Mental Health Counsellor, doctor or other health care provider.

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