



NEW YORK CITY DEPARTMENT OF
HEALTH AND MENTAL HYGIENE

2017 Advisory # 10

Presence of fentanyl in cocaine contributing to increase in drug overdose deaths

People who use cocaine recreationally at exceptionally high risk of overdose

June 1, 2017

This is an update to the Health Advisory issued on October 17, 2016.

Fentanyl is a potent opioid that can be mixed into illicitly sold drugs, often without the buyer's knowledge. In New York City, fentanyl was involved in 44% of overdose deaths during 2016, up from 16% in 2015 and is driving the increase in overdose deaths. During 2016 there were more fatal overdoses than any year on record: when data are finalized the tally is expected to exceed 1,300, up from 937 in 2015.

Fentanyl has been most commonly present in heroin-involved deaths; however, fentanyl has been increasingly identified in overdose deaths involving cocaine, without heroin. In 2016, 37% of overdose deaths involved cocaine and fentanyl without heroin, up from 11% in 2015. Provisional 2017 data suggests that fentanyl is present in more than one third of overdose deaths involving cocaine without heroin.

The NYPD Police laboratory testing data has confirmed the presence of fentanyl mixed in with cocaine products. Opioid naïve individuals, such as people who use cocaine occasionally, are at exceptionally high risk of overdose.

The NYPD laboratory testing has also identified the presence of fentanyl in benzodiazepines and opioid analgesics acquired from non-pharmaceutical sources, as well as heroin, ketamine and methamphetamine.

Fentanyl is a synthetic, short-acting opioid analgesic with a potency 50 to 100 times that of morphine. Fentanyl carries a high risk of overdose, and recent national cases of fentanyl-related morbidity and mortality increasingly have been linked to illegally manufactured fentanyl and fentanyl analogues. These drugs are sold illicitly for their heroin-like effects and may be mixed with heroin and/or cocaine with or without the user's knowledge. In addition, recent law enforcement seizures in several jurisdictions across the United States, including New York City, have identified fentanyl sold in powder and pill formulations, which may be marked as other substances, including benzodiazepines and opioid analgesics.

The New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene is alerting medical personnel that: (1) due to the presence of fentanyl a higher dose or multiple doses of naloxone per overdose event may be required to reverse some opioid-involved overdoses;^{1,2} (2) patients presenting to emergency departments with symptoms indicating opioid intoxication may be unaware that they ingested fentanyl. *Providers should be mindful that fentanyl is not detected by standard urine screens.*

Clinical Information:

- Fentanyl is an opioid analgesic. The biological effects of fentanyl are indistinguishable from those of heroin.
- Treatment is the same as for other opioid overdose, however, larger than usual doses of naloxone (2-10mg) might be required for reversal of the opioid effects.
- Fentanyl is not detected by standard urine opioid immunoassays; therefore, opioid exposure should not be ruled out based on toxicology screen results. Consult your laboratory for preferred testing methods.
- Symptoms of overdose are characteristic of central nervous system depression: lethargy, respiratory depression, pinpoint pupils, change in consciousness, seizure, and/or coma.

Providers can educate patients who are substance users about overdose prevention strategies including: avoiding using drugs alone, avoiding mixing drugs (including alcohol), and recommending that patients participate in overdose prevention education at a local harm reduction program or visiting a participating NYC pharmacy to obtain naloxone for overdose reversal. There are approximately 740 participating pharmacies, including all major chains. For further information, contact DOHMH at 347-396-7909 or lmaldjian1@health.nyc.gov. A fentanyl warning poster is available to hand out or display in health care settings at: <http://www1.nyc.gov/assets/doh/downloads/pdf/mental/fentanyl-poster.pdf>.

Medication-assisted treatment with methadone or buprenorphine also prevents overdose. Treatment locators are available at: www.oasas.ny.gov or www.buprenorphine.samhsa.gov.

Individuals seeking support or treatment for substance use issues for themselves or their loved ones can contact NYC Well by calling 1-888-NYC-WELL, texting “WELL” to 65173 or going to nyc.gov/nycwell.

We remind medical providers that they are required to report suspect or confirmed cases of poisoning by drugs or other toxic agents within 24 hours to the Poison Control Center at 1-800-222-1222 or 212-764-7667 (POISONS). These reports are critical in detecting and preventing overdose outbreaks.

Please share this with any providers you know working with substance users in New York City.

Sincerely,

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²Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Notes from the field: Acetyl fentanyl overdose fatalities - Rhode Island, March-May 2013. MMWR: Morbidity & Mortality Weekly Report [serial online]. August 30, 2013; 62(34):703-704. <http://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/preview/mmwrhtml/mm6234a5.htm>

³Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Recommendations for Laboratory testing for Acetyl Fentanyl and Patient Evaluation and Treatment for Overdose for Synthetic Opioids. HAN Health Advisory. June 20, 2013. <http://stacks.cdc.gov/view/cdc/25259>