

Fact Sheet: Fentanyl

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What Is Fentanyl?

Fentanyl is a synthetic opioid that can be prescribed by doctors for pain management (National Institute on Drug Abuse [NIDA], 2021). It is also increasingly found mixed into street drugs (Drug Enforcement Administration [DEA], 2024). Understanding the dangers of fentanyl is crucial, especially for individuals who might unknowingly consume it or use it without a doctor's prescription.

How Do Opioids Affect the Body?



Figure 1. Lethal Dose of

Fentanyl as Shown Next to a Penny

Photo credit: DEA, n.d.

Opioid medication enters the brain and binds to opioid receptors, restricting pain signals and causing relaxation (Oesterle, 2021). Low doses of opioids can make a person sleepy, but larger doses can cause heart rate and breathing to slow down significantly, resulting in unconsciousness.

Dangers of Fentanyl

Fentanyl is 100 times stronger than morphine and 50 times stronger than heroin (DEA, n.d.). It is so potent that just 2 milligrams can cause someone to experience a fatal

overdose (DEA, 2024). An individual's tolerance to fentanyl will impact the amount required to cause a fatal overdose. Figure 1 shows a lethal dose of fentanyl next to a penny.

Fentanyl can be illegally mixed into other substances, including heroin, cocaine, ecstasy, and methamphetamine (NIDA, 2021). This combination can result in an individual consuming a much stronger substance than they are used to, resulting in overdose and possibly death. The DEA has found an average of 2.4 milligrams of fentanyl in the pills they test (DEA, 2024).

Harm Reduction Approaches

Approaching illegal drug use with harm reduction strategies limits fatal overdoses.

Harm reduction approaches for substance use are strategies that limit fatal overdose by connecting individuals to public services and providing safe spaces to use substances with professionals available and safe-use resources (National Harm Reduction Coalition, n.d.), such as:

1. **Fentanyl test strips.** Allow an individual to test their substances for traces of fentanyl. Visit the [Find Fentanyl Test Strips](#) website from the Utah Department of Health and Human Services for locations across Utah where you can get fentanyl test strips.
2. **Naloxone.** Carry naloxone and let your friends know you have it. Naloxone can reverse the effects of an opioid overdose if given correctly and quickly, including from fentanyl. Contact your local health department to find naloxone in your area.
3. **Safe syringe disposal.** Syringe exchange programs or syringe services programs provide communities with various treatment services and access to sterile syringes and injection equipment. Visit [Syringe Services](#) to learn more and discover services available in Utah.

Responding to an Overdose

Figure 2 shows the signs and symptoms of an opioid overdose. If someone has experienced an overdose from an opioid, including fentanyl, call 9-1-1 and administer naloxone. It is safe to touch the person and items that may have fentanyl on them (like a doorknob) because fentanyl cannot be absorbed through the skin with casual use (Connolly, 2022). However, skin absorption can be affected in unknown ways, so avoid touching your eyes, nose, or mouth and wash your hands with soap and water

as soon as possible (Washington State Department of Health, n.d.).



Figure 2. Signs and

Symptoms of an Opioid Overdose

Figure credit: Chapel Taylor-Olsen

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