

What You Need to Know About Youth & Fentanyl

WHAT IS FENTANYL AND WHY DO WE NEED TO KNOW ABOUT IT?

Fentanyl is a synthetic opioid that is 50 to 100 times as potent as heroin and morphine. Fentanyl is the primary driver of the rise in opioid overdoses.¹ Due to its potency, multiple doses of naloxone may be necessary to reverse an overdose. There are two types of fentanyl:

- **Pharmaceutical fentanyl** is used legally to treat severe pain and must be prescribed by a medical provider.¹
- **Illicitly manufactured fentanyl** is frequently associated with overdoses and is often taken with other drugs (polysubstance use).¹

Youth may be unintentionally exposed to fentanyl in a variety of ways. For example, youth may come into contact with prescribed pharmaceutical fentanyl and fentanyl patches (Duragesic®) at home if they are not stored in safe locations out of reach.³ Youth may also come into contact with illicitly manufactured fentanyl, which is often “laced,” or added to, other drugs to make them cheaper to produce and more addictive for users.⁶ Fentanyl is found in fake or counterfeit pills that look like OxyContin®, Xanax®, Adderall® and other pharmaceutical medications such as liquid products like nasal sprays and eye drops.^{1,4}

Rainbow fentanyl, which is brightly colored, comes in pill, powder or block form and has been found in 26 states as of August 2022.²

HOW DOES FENTANYL IMPACT YOUTH?

Between 2020 and 2021, drug overdose deaths among youth aged 14–18 years increased 20%, with researchers identifying fentanyl as the primary cause. In 2021, 77% of teen drug overdose deaths were linked to fentanyl.⁵ Many of these overdoses were due to fake or counterfeit pills laced with fentanyl but made to look like prescription opioids or benzodiazepines.⁵ Young people can easily purchase fake or counterfeit pills from the internet⁷ and they are commonly advertised and sold on social media.⁴ This highlights the importance of education about the dangers of fentanyl among youth.

YOUR ROLE AS A PROVIDER: PREVENTION STRATEGIES

ENGAGING WITH YOUTH AND FENTANYL

Youth trust health care providers to provide them with accurate information around substance use.¹⁰ When talking about the risks of fentanyl, share information about its dangerous and deadly effects. Offer educational resources to youth and parents/caregivers, such as [substance fact sheets](#) or strategies from the [Getting Candid Message Guide for Providers](#).

Keep communication around substances open and ask what they are seeing online. Young people may think that overdoses only happen to people who frequently use substances or those with a substance use disorder. Help dispel myths about drug overdose and increase youth awareness around the presence and risks of fentanyl and fentanyl-laced products.

Share these takeaway messages:

- Overdose can happen to anyone. Fentanyl is a leading cause of overdose and it is frequently encountered as an unknown additive.
- Never take pills or other drugs that were not prescribed for you from a pharmacy or dispensary.
- No substance bought online is safe. It is difficult to know what is in substances sold illegally and fentanyl has been found in almost every illegal drug.⁴
- Always carry naloxone. When given in time, it can reverse an opioid overdose.

OVERDOSE REVERSAL PRODUCTS

Naloxone is an opioid antagonist that reverses the effects of an opioid overdose.⁸ It works to block the effects of the opioid by attaching to the same receptors in the brain to restore breathing to a person experiencing an opioid overdose. Some overdoses may require more than one dose of naloxone.⁸

- Naloxone comes in both an injectable form and a needle-free device sprayed into the nostril (e.g., generic naloxone, Narcan®, Kloxxado®).⁸
- Providers should obtain and carry naloxone as an easy precautionary measure. Naloxone is available in every state and usually available at pharmacies without a prescription or community naloxone programs.¹
 - Find [community programs](#) offering naloxone near you.
 - Watch a [Narcan training video](#).

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CONTRIBUTIONS: Review and edits by Pamela Pietruszewski and Flannery Peterson

This project is supported by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) as part of a financial assistance award totaling \$1,500,000 with 100% funded by CDC/HHS. The contents are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily represent the official views of, nor an endorsement, by CDC/HHS or the U.S. Government.