Fentanyl Overdose

Fentanyl overdose is a dangerous condition that can result in death.

What Is Fentanyl?
Fentanyl is a synthetic opioid that is used to treat severe pain. It is 50 to 100 times stronger than morphine. Pharmaceutical fentanyl refers to fentanyl that is prescribed by doctors and can be given as a pill, lozenge, spray (in the nose or under the tongue), skin patch, or injection. Nonpharmaceutical fentanyl is manufactured illegally and is often combined as a powder or liquid with illicit drugs (such as cocaine, methamphetamine, and heroin) or made into counterfeit prescription pills.

What Are Fentanyl Analogue?
Fentanyl analogues, such as acetylfentanyl, furanylfentanyl, carfentanil, and U-47700, are illicit drugs that have chemical structures that are similar but not identical to fentanyl. Fentanyl analogues are not easily identified because they require specialized toxicology tests for detection. Although some fentanyl analogues are less potent than fentanyl, others are much stronger. Carfentanil, which is the most potent fentanyl analogue currently in the US, is about 10,000 times stronger than morphine.

Common Signs and Symptoms of Fentanyl Overdose
As with other opioids, fentanyl overdose may cause small, constricted “pinpoint” pupils; choking or gurgling; cold and/or clammy skin; loss of consciousness; and slow, weak, or absent breathing.

Fentanyl Overdose Deaths in the US
The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) reported 71,238 deaths in 2021 due to fentanyl overdose. Fentanyl overdose deaths in the US have increased substantially since 2013, and most of these deaths are due to use of nonpharmaceutical fentanyl.

How Is Fentanyl Overdose Treated?
Naloxone is a medication that quickly reverses the effects of opioids and can prevent death due to drug overdose with fentanyl or any other opioid. Naloxone is available as a nasal spray or injection and can be administered by people without medical training. Naloxone can be obtained in local pharmacies in all US states.

Naloxone should be immediately discarded. Fentanyl test strips can be used by individuals to help identify whether fentanyl has been combined with another drug. Drug samples that test positive for fentanyl have a high risk of fatal overdose and should be immediately discarded.

How to Prevent Fentanyl Overdose
The best and easiest way to prevent fentanyl overdose is never to use illicit drugs and to avoid buying prescription pills through social media or e-commerce platforms because they may contain deadly amounts of fentanyl or methamphetamine. In addition, patients should not take pharmaceutical fentanyl without medical supervision.

The CDC recommends that people taking high daily doses of pharmaceutical fentanyl or other opioids should have naloxone available in case of an overdose. Individuals who use illicit drugs are encouraged never to use drugs alone so that naloxone or other emergency assistance can be provided if an overdose occurs.

For individuals who use illicit drugs, fentanyl test strips can help identify whether fentanyl has been combined with another drug (such as cocaine, methamphetamine, or heroin). Fentanyl test strips are dipped into a sample of illicit drug that has been mixed with water, and test results are available in 5 minutes or less. Any drug sample that tests positive for fentanyl should immediately be discarded due to the high risk of fatal overdose. Because fentanyl test strips are not 100% accurate, a negative result does not completely rule out the presence of fentanyl, and some fentanyl analogues may not be detected with fentanyl test strips. Contact your local health department to learn how to obtain fentanyl test strips.

FOR MORE INFORMATION
• Centers for Disease Control and Prevention
  www.cdc.gov/stopoverdose/naloxone/index.html
• Drug Enforcement Administration
  www.dea.gov/onepill

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