



To: CAHAN San Diego Participants
Date: September 14, 2018
From: Health and Human Services Agency

Fentanyl Overdoses Related to Illicit Drug Use

This health advisory informs providers about recent overdose cases of fentanyl-containing cocaine in San Diego County. It also contains recommendations for local healthcare providers and resource links.

Key Points:

- Cases of fentanyl-contaminated cocaine leading to overdoses and deaths in San Diego County have been recently identified.
- Nationwide, fentanyl is increasingly being laced into street-purchased drugs (including cocaine, methamphetamine, heroin, and counterfeit benzodiazepine and opioid prescription pills). Users of these drugs may not be aware of potential exposure to fentanyl, and opioid naïve individuals are more likely to have an overdose.
- Respiratory support and naloxone are the best treatments for fentanyl-related overdoses, and larger than usual doses of naloxone may be required.
- Widespread access to naloxone is essential to prevent fentanyl-related deaths.

Situation

On the weekend of September 8-9, 2018, three individuals died and at least two others were treated in San Diego County for drug overdoses connected to cocaine laced with fentanyl. The surviving victims reported intending to use cocaine only, but testing revealed exposure to fentanyl. Law enforcement officials are currently [investigating](#) the cluster of deaths and overdoses.

This incident highlights a concerning [national](#) and local trend of illicit opioid and non-opioid drugs and counterfeit pills being laced with illegally manufactured fentanyl and related chemical compounds, [resulting in increased morbidity and mortality](#). The recent overdose cases indicate that some users are unaware of the risk of fentanyl contamination of illicit drugs, which is not limited to cocaine. San Diego County healthcare providers can take actions to protect and prevent overdoses among their patients and/or clients.

Across San Diego County, there were 81 fentanyl-related deaths in 2017, 15% of which were associated with fentanyl alone. Due to fentanyl's potency (50 to 100 times that of morphine), fentanyl has a greater risk of fatal overdose than other opioids. The most effective treatment for opioid overdoses is respiratory support and naloxone, an opioid receptor antagonist. Larger than usual doses of naloxone

(2-10 mg) [may be needed](#) to reverse the opioid effects from fentanyl and repeated dosing may be required, particularly when fentanyl-laced substances are consumed. Healthcare providers, first responders, and illicit drug users should be aware of the dangers of fentanyl overdose, the recent trend of lacing other drugs with fentanyl, and treatment options for overdoses.

Background

Fentanyl is a synthetic, short-acting, highly potent opioid analgesic that carries a high risk of overdose. Illicit drugs, including heroin and cocaine, can be laced with fentanyl, which may result in users of illicit drugs being exposed to fentanyl without their knowledge.

Fentanyl results in the same central nervous system depression as heroin. Overdose symptoms of opioids, such as fentanyl, include lethargy, respiratory depression, pinpoint pupils, change in consciousness, seizure, slowed or erratic heart rate, nausea or vomiting, muscle spasm, clammy skin, change in skin color, and/or coma. The classic [triad](#) of altered mental status, pinpoint pupils, and depressed respirations suggests an opioid overdose. However, mixed overdoses may present with dilated pupils. The key concerns are whether there is adequate ventilation and whether the respiratory depression requires naloxone for reversal.

Recent cases of fentanyl-related overdoses (and deaths) have increasingly been linked to illegally manufactured fentanyl and fentanyl analogs. Nationally and locally, fentanyl has been seized by law enforcement in both powder and pill formulations, which may be marked as other substances.

Recommendations

- **Suspect fentanyl toxicity in overdose cases**, particularly in patients presenting with symptoms consistent with opioid overdose. Note that patients exposed to fentanyl-related compounds may be unaware of their exposure.
- Consider **multiple and higher doses of naloxone may be needed to counteract fentanyl-related overdoses** due to its high potency.
- Remind ordering physicians to check with their laboratories as **fentanyl may not be detected by some urine opioid screens**.
- **Educate patients who may be using illicit drugs** about the increase in counterfeit pills and illicit drugs laced with fentanyl, and the associated risk of overdose.
- **Offer naloxone to at-risk patients and their family members, friends, and peers** and educate them about how to access and use it. Risk factors for opioid overdose include: use of street-purchased drugs, a history of overdose or substance use disorder, a prescription for an opioid dose ≥ 50 morphine milligram equivalents (MME)/day, and concurrent use of benzodiazepines and opioids. Emergency departments can serve as points of intervention for persons who experience overdose, and post-overdose protocols are recommended that include naloxone prescription and patient referral to case management services or peer navigators.
- **Refer patients with substance use disorders for treatment by calling 2-1-1 or through the County Behavioral Health Services** by calling the Access and Crisis line at 1-888-724-7240. Patients with opioid use disorder should be referred to [evidenced-based treatments](#), including medication assisted therapy (MAT) when possible.

Resources

Federal

CDC Health Advisory 413: [Rising Numbers of Deaths Involving Fentanyl and Fentanyl Analogs, Including Carfentanyl, and Increasing Usage and Mixing with Non-opioids](#)

CDC Opioid Overdose webpage: [Understanding the Epidemic](#)

Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) [Opioid Overdose Prevention Toolkit](#)

Local

California Poison Control, San Diego Division [webpage](#) (phone number 1-800-222-1222)

San Diego County Behavioral Health Services [Provider Directory](#)

San Diego County Medication Assisted Treatment [Patient Referral Directory](#)

San Diego County Prescription Drug Abuse Task Force [webpage](#)

Thank you for your participation.

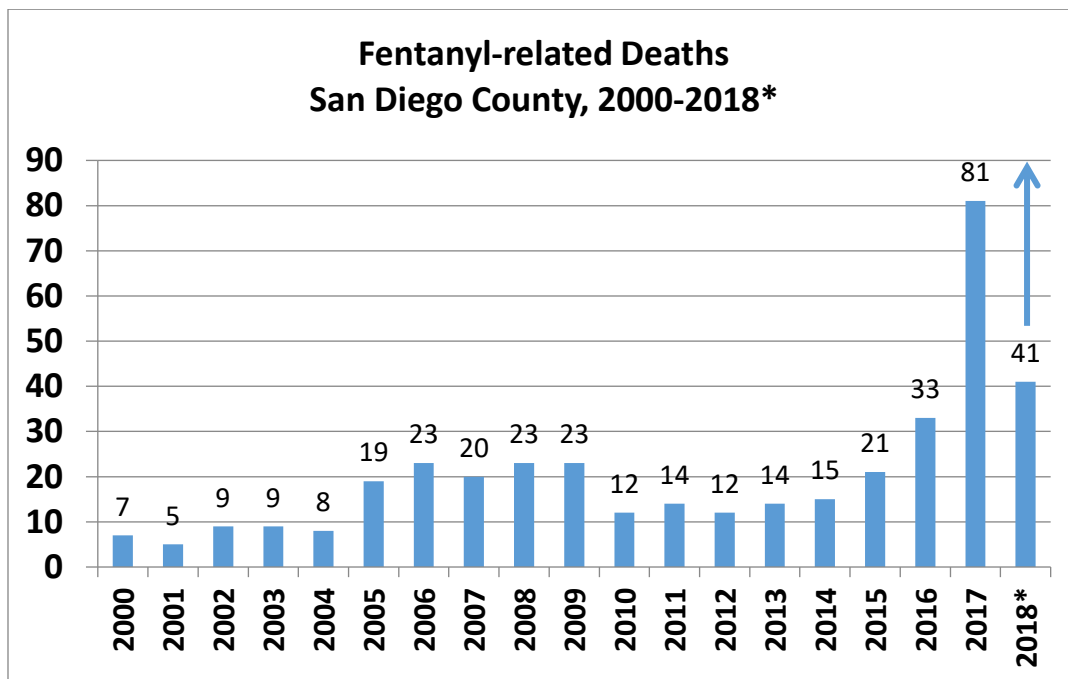
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* 2018 data are closed cases through June 30, 2018. Case count expected to rise significantly due to cases under investigation.

Source: San Diego County Medical Examiner's Office