



**LAC DPH Health Advisory:
Fentanyl Overdoses Related to Illicit
Drug Use**

May 24, 2018



*This message is intended for emergency departments, first responders, behavioral health providers, and other health care professionals and facilities that care for patients at risk for substance misuse and abuse.
Please distribute as appropriate.*

Key Messages

- Three cases of suspected fentanyl-related overdose deaths were recently identified in Los Angeles County after the use of cocaine tainted with fentanyl.
- Nationwide, fentanyl is increasingly being laced into street-purchased drugs (including cocaine, methamphetamine, heroin, counterfeit benzodiazepines, and opioids), thus increasing the risk for overdose.
- Widespread access to naloxone (Narcan) is essential to prevent fentanyl-related overdose deaths.
- Suspected and confirmed fentanyl-related overdoses in LA County should be reported by phone to the Los Angeles County Department of Public Health (LAC DPH): 626-299-3504.

Situation

On April 26, 2018, three males between the ages of 35 and 45 were found dead in a residence in LA County. The victims were reportedly using cocaine, but the initial investigation suggests they died of fentanyl exposure.

This incident highlights a concerning national and local trend of illicit drugs and counterfeit pills being laced with illegally manufactured fentanyl and related chemical compounds. While fentanyl-related overdose death rates and seizures of drugs containing fentanyl by law enforcement in LA County are notably less than other areas of the country, such as in the Northeast and Southeast, these trends warrant attention and action.

Given the potency of fentanyl, death from toxicity can be more rapid than with other opioids, and the presence of drugs contaminated with fentanyl in the community increases the likelihood of overdose deaths. As a result, awareness among health professionals, first responders, and individuals who use substances is essential, as is the availability of naloxone, the opioid receptor antagonist that is the gold standard for treating opioid overdoses.

Actions Requested of Providers

Treating Overdose Cases

- **Suspect fentanyl toxicity in overdose cases**, particularly in patients presenting with symptoms consistent with opioid overdose (see *Diagnosis* section below). Note that patients exposed to fentanyl-related compounds may be unaware of their exposure.
- **Be aware that if fentanyl is involved, multiple and higher doses of naloxone are often needed** due to the higher potency of fentanyl compared to other opioids.
- **Report all suspected and confirmed fentanyl-related overdose cases** to the LA County DPH Substance Abuse Prevention and Control at: 626-299-3504 (see *Reporting* section for cases in Pasadena and Long Beach).

Preventing Overdoses

- **Educate patients** at risk of substance use disorder about the rise of counterfeit pills and illicit drugs contaminated with fentanyl, and the increased risk of overdose.
- **Offer naloxone to at-risk patients and to members of their social networks** (family members, friends, peers) and educate them about how to access and use it. Individuals at risk of opioid overdose include those who: use street-purchased drugs, have a history of overdose or substance use disorder, are prescribed an opioid dose ≥ 50 morphine milligram equivalents (MME)/day, or who use benzodiazepines concurrently with opioids. Patients should be encouraged to keep naloxone with them at all times. Witnesses can administer naloxone as a first aid measure whenever coming across someone with suspected opioid/fentanyl overdose. Naloxone can be obtained from the distribution centers listed below.
- **Discuss the potential risks and benefits of fentanyl test strips with patients who use street drugs.** Currently, as a means of preventing fentanyl-related overdoses, harm reduction providers are distributing point-of-care fentanyl test strips to help users of street drugs identify fentanyl contamination. Patients need to understand that while fentanyl test strips can be helpful to identify the presence of fentanyl, the test strips are not fully reliable due to variability in chemical composition of fentanyl analogues (see *Fentanyl Test Strips* section below).
- **Refer patients with substance use disorders for treatment** (see below for referral information).

Diagnosis of Fentanyl Toxicity

Fentanyl toxicity presents in a similar way as other opioid overdoses, though the onset tends to be faster, more severe, longer lasting, and less responsive to therapies such as naloxone. The diagnosis of fentanyl is primarily based on a clinical history and signs that may include:

- Altered mental status
- Loss of consciousness
- Pinpoint pupils
- Respiratory depression
- Slowed or erratic heart rate
- Nausea / vomiting
- Muscle spasms
- Cold, clammy skin
- Skin color changes
- Seizures
- Death

Special laboratory confirmatory tests are available for fentanyl, but standard urine and drug toxicology screens are unable to reliably detect these compounds, particularly when they are illicitly manufactured and when synthetic analogues are involved.

Fentanyl Test Strips

Fentanyl test strips have [shown promise](#) in reducing fentanyl-related overdose deaths in outbreaks on the East Coast. While use of fentanyl test strips may help to identify the presence of fentanyl in street-purchased drugs, the test is not fully reliable due to variability in the illegal manufacturing of fentanyl and the possibility of producing chemical analogues that may result in false negative screenings. As a result, although the use of fentanyl test strips may reduce the likelihood of fentanyl-related overdoses, it will not eliminate it.

Naloxone Distribution Programs

Naloxone can be obtained from naloxone distribution programs and syringe access sites, including these locations in LA County:

- Common Ground – <http://commongroundhiv.org/>
622 Rose Avenue; Venice, CA 90291
310-314-5480
- *Homeless Health Care Los Angeles – <http://www.hhcla.org/>
Center for Harm Reduction
512 E. 4th Street; Los Angeles, CA 90013
213-617-8408
- LA Community Health Project - <http://chpla.org/>
672 South Lafayette Park Place; Los Angeles, CA 90057
213-568-3542

*Programs indicated by an asterisk above also offer fentanyl test strips.

Referring Patients with Substance Use Disorder for Treatment

In LA County, health care providers and patients can find substance use treatment services and bed availability using an online, filterable service locator known as the Services and Bed Availability Tool (SBAT) or by calling the Substance Abuse Service Helpline (SASH). Services include outpatient and intensive outpatient treatment, residential treatment, withdrawal management, and Opioid Treatment Programs.

- Services and Bed Availability Tool: <http://sapccis.ph.lacounty.gov/sbat/>
- Substance Abuse Service Helpline: 844-804-7500

Reporting Suspected and Confirmed Fentanyl-Related Overdose Cases

- *Los Angeles County* – Contact LA County DPH Substance Abuse Prevention and Control: 626-299-3504
- *Long Beach* – Contact the City of Long Beach Health Department: 562-570-4302
- *Pasadena* – Contact the City of Pasadena Public Health Department: 626-744-6089

Additional Resources

- Influx of Fentanyl-laced Counterfeit Pills and Toxic Fentanyl-related Compounds Further Increases Risk of Fentanyl-related Overdose and Fatalities, CDC HAN, 2016 <http://emergency.cdc.gov/han/han00395.asp>
- California Poison Control <http://www.calpoison.org/>

This Health Advisory was sent by Gary Tsai, MD, Medical Director and Science Officer, Substance Abuse Prevention and Control, Los Angeles County Department of Public Health.

To view this and other communications or to sign-up to receive LAHANs, please visit <http://publichealth.lacounty.gov/lahan>