

# Fentanyl: Secret ingredient in non-opioid drugs a driving factor in Oxford County's overdose crisis

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By Nicole Carter

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REGION — Fatal drug overdoses in Maine climbed in 2021 at an alarming rate. The issue is magnified in Oxford county: in 2019 there were 9 recorded overdose deaths and in 2020 it went up to 15. In 2021, there were 28 deaths, almost doubling over the previous year.

“It was shocking,” Kari Taylor, director of the Western Maine Addiction Recovery Initiative (WMARI), told the Advertiser Democrat. “We knew we were on track for an increase, but nothing like this. In one month alone last year, there were seven deaths caused by drug overdoses.”

The presence of the non pharmaceutical additive fentanyl in substances is the primary reason that overdoses have so sharply increased, according to Taylor.

“The availability and prevalence in the drug supply has increased dramatically. It takes just the most minute amount of fentanyl for a person to overdose,” she explained. “With a lot of opioids, like heroin, the inclusion of fentanyl in the overall supply is now the norm.

“And we’re finding it mixed in with a number of other illicit substances as well. It’s in cocaine, in crystal meth. It’s in what look like prescription pills. They look just like real medications. They’re stamped, they’re marked but they’re actually illegally made with fentanyl.”

More and more often, fentanyl is being found in people’s systems who do not identify with heroin or opioids, and in different, non-overdose situations. It has been detected in blood or urine tests given for other purposes.

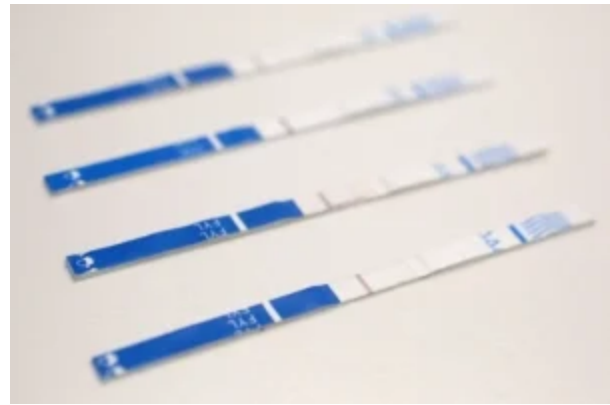
Recreational users of drugs like cocaine who are not addicted to that substance can become opioid addicts without realizing it.

Taylor said one way for people to protect themselves is to assess their substances with fentanyl test strips, which are available from harm reduction organizations and some outreach groups at no cost. The test strips provide a proactive way for users to know if their drugs have been tainted with fentanyl.

Taylor cited one instance where a person stopped using methamphetamine and was overtaken by opioid withdrawal symptoms – aches and pain, nausea and anxiety – not those associated with crystal meth. The drugs they stopped using had been cut with fentanyl.

“There are people who use secretly” or casually, Taylor said. “They may not have contact with harm reduction organizations. They are not getting exposed to this information about fentanyl, they may not even be aware how at risk they are to it.

“It’s becoming something where many people have heard about (fentanyl) it, but they may not understand that one line or that one little bump is enough to actually kill you.”



Fentanyl test strips *Associated Press*

Specific to rural areas like Oxford county, more fentanyl in the drug supply is driving addiction and overdose deaths, but access to treatment remains out of reach for users.

“A person decides to seek help, but there are waiting lists to get into detox, or they can’t even find resources. Even when they want to stop, their addiction requires them to keep using to keep from getting sick,” Taylor explained. “The more we talk about substance use disorder and the more we connect it with people, the easier it will be for them to seek help.”

Recovery help groups like WMARI are focused on reducing the public stigma of substance abuse disorder and raising awareness of how dangerous fentanyl is.

“We need to make the community more aware,” Taylor said. “People need to see substance use disorder in the same way that they see other diseases and illness. This is a public health concern.”

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