

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 recent 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 (IMF), which is often “laced,” or added to, other drugs to make them cheaper to produce and more addictive for users.⁶ IMF is often 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%, and researchers identified fentanyl as the primary cause of this increase.⁵ In 2021, 77% of teen drug overdose deaths were linked to fentanyl.⁵ Many of these overdoses were due to fake or counterfeit pills made to look like prescription opioids or benzodiazepines and were laced with IMF.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: OVERDOSE 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, use scientific data and share information about the dangerous effects. Offer educational resources to youth and parents/caregivers, such as [substance fact sheets](#) or [Guide to Fake Pills](#), and use strategies from the [Getting Candid Message Guide for Providers](#) or Marijuana Talk Kit to start effective conversations around substance use.

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.

PREVENTION 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 receptor and can 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, from local community naloxone programs or syringe services programs.¹
 - Find [community programs](#) offering naloxone near you.
 - Watch a [Narcan training video](#).

Fentanyl test strips (FTS) are a drug testing tool used to detect the presence of fentanyl⁹ with an estimated accuracy of 96%. However, user error, false positives or an undetectable drug analogue may make test strips less accurate.⁹ For more information on FTS, read this [Fentanyl Test Strips Fact Sheet](#).

- Check out this [informational video](#) from Prevent Overdose Rhode Island about how to use fentanyl test strips and share it with other providers or young people.
- The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) also created this [step-by-step process](#) on how to use test strips.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Share these resources with other providers and youth to provide further information on evidence-based strategies to prevent and reduce overdose and other drug-related harms.

- CDC: [Stop Overdose](#)
- Drug Policy Alliance: [Safety First: Real Drug Education for Teens Curriculum](#)
- Drug Policy Alliance: [Safety First: A Reality-based Approach to Teens and Drugs](#)
- National Harm Reduction Coalition: [Find Harm Reduction Resources Near You](#)
- Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration: [Opioid Overdose Prevention Toolkit](#)



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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.