



DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH & HUMAN SERVICES

Substance Abuse and Mental
Health Services Administration

Center for Mental Health Services
Center for Substance Abuse Prevention
Center for Substance Abuse Treatment
Rockville, MD 20857

June 2, 2006

Dear Colleague:

A combination of street drugs—taken together—is having a lethal effect in a number of communities across the country. The root cause of these deaths appears to be the addition of fentanyl—a powerful narcotic analgesic—to heroin or cocaine being sold on the street. Fentanyl, prescribed most often by physicians to treat patients with severe or chronic pain, is 50-100 times more powerful than morphine.

You may have been reading and hearing about clusters of drug-related deaths in Philadelphia, Chicago, St. Louis, and, most recently, Detroit. In just one week, an estimated 33 individuals in the Detroit area are reported to have died after using this fatal mix of drugs; the same drug combination may have been responsible for over 100 deaths in the same region since last September. As an individual involved in the public health, you need to be aware of this new “killer drug combination,” and you need to be prepared to alert patients, clients, and others in order to help save lives.

When used illegally, particularly in combination with a drug such as heroin or cocaine, or when used in excessive amounts, fentanyl can result in irregular heart beat, the inability to breathe, and death. In some cases, heroin or cocaine users are aware they are purchasing this dangerous combination of drugs; in other cases, the buyer is not aware that he or she is purchasing this potentially lethal drug combination. The current situation highlights the need to be vigilant in your community for the possible introduction of this potent drug mixture into circulation on the street, and to help educate individuals with whom you come in contact.

As professionals individuals involved in substance abuse treatment and prevention, you have many tools at your disposal right in your community to help prevent overdoses and deaths, and to help identify and rapidly treat overdoses. The appended fact sheet can be reproduced and distributed as you believe most appropriate and effective. We hope you will work with your local health authorities to bring this critical information to first responders, emergency room personnel, street substance abuse workers, drug treatment facilities, local health care providers, the recovery community, and the public at large. At the very least, please get the word out to your own networks of patients and colleagues about this dangerous drug combination and how to treat its effects.

SAMHSA can provide additional information to you on this emerging area of substance abuse concern. Please contact Kenneth Hoffman, M.D, M.P.H., at 240-276-2701 or Kenneth.Hoffman@samhsa.hhs.gov. Let us know what you are doing in your community. Together, we can reduce the danger associated with this new, often lethal street drug cocktail.

Sincerely yours,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "H. Westley Clark", is positioned above the typed name.

H. Westley Clark, M.D., J.D., MPH. CAS, FASAM.
Director
Center for Substance Abuse Treatment

Enclosure

Fact Sheet: Heroin Fentanyl

THE ISSUE

- An outbreak of overdoses and deaths involving fentanyl combined with heroin or cocaine has been reported in a number of urban areas in the United States, including, among others, Chicago (IL), Detroit (MI), Philadelphia (PA), and Camden (NJ).
- The majority of overdoses and deaths related to fentanyl in combination with heroin or cocaine that are now being reported do not appear to be from the misuse of prescription-grade fentanyl.
- These reports have led to local Drug Enforcement Administration and Centers for Disease Control and Prevention investigations as well as local—and national – health information efforts to alert first responders, hospital emergency rooms, health care providers, and the community about this new public health problem.

WHAT IS FENTANYL

- Fentanyl, a schedule II prescription narcotic analgesic, is roughly 50-80 times more potent than morphine. This medication is used to manage both pain during surgery and for persons with chronic moderate to severe pain who already are physically tolerant to opiates.
- However, fentanyl also can be produced in clandestine laboratories in powder form and mixed with or substituted for heroin.

PREVENTING OVERDOSES

Persons using heroin or cocaine, or in treatment/recovery from such use need to know that:

- The potency of street-sold heroin or cocaine is amplified markedly by fentanyl.
- One may not know that the heroin or cocaine has been cut with fentanyl.
- Because the potency of the drug purchased on the street is not known, and because the inclusion of fentanyl may not be disclosed, ANY use – even a reduced dose – can result in overdose or death.
- The effects of an overdose occur rapidly, particularly with this potent combination of drugs. Critical treatment minutes can be lost because emergency room personnel may not be aware that fentanyl is not detected in standard toxicology screens.

DETECTING AND TREATING OVERDOSES

- Fentanyl-related overdoses can result in sudden death through respiratory arrest, cardiac arrest, severe respiratory depression, cardiovascular collapse or severe anaphylactic reaction.
- Routine toxicology screens for opiates will **not** detect fentanyl. Some labs can test for fentanyl when specifically requested.
- Because these drugs, in combination, can be lethal if action is not taken promptly, suspected overdoses should be treated rapidly with a naloxone injection, 0.4-2 mg IV, SC or IM every 2 to 3 minutes which should rapidly reverse symptoms related to a narcotic overdose. Naloxone can also precipitate immediate narcotic withdrawal symptoms as overdose symptoms are reversed. If there is no response after 10 minutes, a different diagnosis should be considered.