

# What is Fentanyl?

Fentanyl is a synthetic opioid that is 30 to 50 times more potent than heroin and 80 to 100 times more potent than morphine. While fentanyl has been used safely in medical settings since the 1960s, the presence of non-pharmaceutical fentanyl in the street drug supply has contributed to the rise in overdose-related deaths over the past few years.

It is important to know the facts about fentanyl to know how to respond to and prevent fentanyl-related overdoses.

## Facts

- Pharmaceutical fentanyl is typically prescribed and monitored as an anesthetic in surgery, for pain management after trauma or for severe chronic pain.
- Non-pharmaceutical fentanyl is produced illicitly and is now found in much of the street drug supply. It has contributed to the rise in opioid-related overdoses and overdose-related deaths over the past few years.
- Fentanyl in the street drug supply is found in powder or pill form, on its own or in combination with heroin and other drugs, or marketed as heroin or other opioids.
- Part of the danger of fentanyl in the street drug supply stems from the fact that there is an inconsistent or non-existent oversight of ingredients and potency.
- Preparing recreational drugs on the same surface increases the risk of workspace contamination with fentanyl, which can then lead to an increased risk of fentanyl-related overdose for people who use non-opioids (e.g., cocaine, methamphetamines, etc.).

## Dispelling Myths

- **Fentanyl is NOT naloxone resistant.**  
Fentanyl and its analogues are opioids, and naloxone works to reverse the effects of opioids. Due to the potency of fentanyl, more doses of naloxone may be required to reverse a fentanyl overdose. It is also important to remember that naloxone can take 2 to 3 minutes before it takes effect.
- **You CANNOT overdose from fentanyl by touching the powder or breathing in a space where fentanyl powder is present.**  
Fentanyl must be introduced into the body via a mucus membrane or the bloodstream for any effects to be felt. Though fentanyl patches are used in pain management, the formulation is very different from what is found in the street drug supply.
- **Fentanyl is NOT being laced in marijuana, nor can you overdose by smoking fentanyl-laced marijuana.**
- Not only is there no evidence that this is happening, but fentanyl burns at a lower temperature than marijuana and would be gone by the time the marijuana is hot enough to burn.

## Overdoses

### Be aware of the signs and symptoms of a fentanyl overdose

- Discolored lips or fingernails
- Weak, slow or no breathing
- A choking/gurgling sound
- Pinpoint pupils
- Cold, clammy or discolored skin

### Respond to a fentanyl-related overdose the same way you would respond to any other opioid-related overdose

- Determine if the person is responsive. Close your hand in a fist and rub your knuckles against the person's chest. Say loudly, "I am going to give you naloxone."
- If the person does not respond, proceed with the following steps:
  - Call 911. Describe the symptoms the person who is overdosing is exhibiting (discolored lips and fingernails, shallow or no breathing, etc). Mentioning drugs is not necessary. Tell the dispatcher what you see, not what you think is happening.
  - Give the person naloxone.
- Support the person's breathing by giving rescue breaths and making sure there is nothing in their mouth that may obstruct their breathing.
- If the person is not responding to naloxone, do not panic! Naloxone can take 2-3 minutes before it takes effect. Sometimes, more than one dose may be necessary, but be sure to wait 2-3 minutes between doses and administer rescue breathing between doses until the person becomes responsive and/or emergency services arrive. Always make sure to stay with the person until additional support arrives.

## Fentanyl test strips

Fentanyl test strips are a great tool in overdose prevention. They are used to detect the presence of fentanyl in a drug you intend to consume.

Be aware of the "chocolate chip cookie" effect: Fentanyl and its analogues are almost never mixed evenly with other drugs. Therefore, make sure to crush, chop and mix your drugs as much as possible before testing a sample if you are not testing all of your drugs. Each fentanyl test strip brand has slightly different instructions. Be sure the instructions you follow are specific to the brand you are using.

Fentanyl test strips can be found for free at distribution sites across Louisiana. Find a location near you at [louisianahealthhub.org/hrdhub](https://louisianahealthhub.org/hrdhub).