



## The Deadliest Opioid Drug

Fentanyl, a Schedule II Controlled Substance, is an opioid-based drug that has caused many thousands of overdose deaths, including the death of the entertainer Prince in 2016. It is a synthetic opioid painkiller with serious side effects that can cause life-threatening events in even very small amounts. In many parts of America fentanyl is killing more people than heroin.

Physicians may prescribe pharmaceutical fentanyl to patients with acute pain, but it is also manufactured illegally in dirty, clandestine laboratories and imported into the U.S. by Mexican drug cartels. It is so deadly that the drug dealers call it "the little devil." Carfentanil, a drug that is similar to fentanyl but is 100 times more potent, has been named the drug of mass destruction.

Fentanyl is usually mixed with heroin and sold to users looking for a cheap high. The drug is 100 times more powerful than heroin, and the Drug Enforcement Administration reports that only 2 mg of fentanyl is a fatal dose for most people.

## Illegally Manufactured Fentanyl

Most of the fentanyl-related deaths are due to use of non-pharmaceutical, illicit fentanyl. Illegally produced fentanyl is often sold to drug addicts as heroin, which makes users think they are injecting a less dangerous drug and end up taking too much. An amount of fentanyl equal to only 2 to 3 grams of salt can be deadly, not only for the user,

but also for innocent victims who do not use drugs.

There have been many news reports of police officers and their drug dogs being hospitalized after coming into contact with fentanyl while executing search warrants. For those who have never used heroin and have never taken an opioid-based painkiller, their system has not developed a tolerance for opioids, and exposure to fentanyl could result in an overdose.

## Fentanyl Overdoses

Fentanyl is especially dangerous because it can be absorbed through the skin or inhaled. For this reason, even in medical settings, medical professionals are trained to handle the drug with extreme caution.

Emergency service personnel are advised to keep the overdose-reversal drug naloxone on hand in case of fentanyl exposure. When a doctor prescribes fentanyl for a legitimate medical reason, the physician will usually also prescribe naloxone along with it.

Patients on fentanyl are closely monitored in an effort to keep the individual from becoming dependent on the drug. Those who have become addicted to fentanyl have gone as far as applying heat (from a microwave) to their fentanyl patch in order to defeat the slow-release mechanism and get the full effect of the drug all at once. Too often, this results in the patient's overdose.

But even long-term heroin users and opioid drug abusers can sometimes overdose on fentanyl. When a heroin addict

who has been in recovery relapses and uses fentanyl, an overdose is likely because the user has lost his or her tolerance.

### **Increase in Black Market Sales**

Drug dealers obtain pharmaceutical fentanyl on the black market and squeeze the gel out of the prescription medication to mix it with heroin. This imprecise method of drug manufacturing often results in a deadly combination known as “killer narcotics.”

The demand for fentanyl has created an increase in black market sales of the drug, along with other opioid-based drugs like hydrocodone and oxycodone. This increased demand has resulted in a quadrupling of prescription opioids in America in less than a decade. It is now estimated that 80% of new needle-heroin addicts started their drug use with prescription painkillers like fentanyl.

### **Fentanyl Use, Workplace Impact**

The increase in prescription opioid use, including fentanyl, has led to problems in the workplace. Side effects of fentanyl use include vomiting, sedation, confusion, hallucinations, and injuries from falls. More serious side effects include severe breathing problems and low blood pressure resulting in coma or death.

Many employers are concerned about prescription painkillers like fentanyl being abused by their workers. One recent national survey found that 61% of employers in the U.S. are concerned about opioid misuse, and many feel unprepared to deal

with the issue. One-third of the companies surveyed said that prescription drug abuse is a threat to their company’s reputation, and 40% of the small businesses surveyed said they would dismiss employees for prescription drug abuse. News stories from all across America highlight employers’ problems with hiring and retaining qualified employees due to the problem of prescription painkiller abuse. In the current tight labor market, the opioid epidemic in our country makes finding and retaining good employees even more difficult for companies.

### **Help for Fentanyl Addicts**

Fentanyl is highly addictive for several reasons. Like other opioids, it binds to receptors in the brain that control pain and emotions. Use of the drug causes a spike in dopamine, which creates a rush of euphoria in the user that can lead to overuse and abuse. Because the body builds a tolerance to the drug over time, the user must take higher and higher doses to get the same result. Eventually, this increased use can result in a fatal overdose.

With the increasing use of fentanyl and all of the dangers associated with the drug, it is important for those struggling with dependence and addiction to get help. The Substance Abuse Mental Health Administration’s National Helpline is a free, confidential, 24/7, 365-day-a-year treatment referral and information service (in English and Spanish) for individuals facing substance abuse disorders. Call 1-800-662-HELP (4357) for assistance.

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