

Illicit fentanyl: An emerging threat to people who use drugs in BC

Fentanyl-detected illicit drug overdose deaths in British Columbia increased dramatically from 5% of total illicit drug deaths in 2012 to over 25% in 2014.¹ While clusters of fentanyl-detected deaths have been reported in Canada and the US,² these recent deaths represent an emerging public health concern in BC.

Fentanyl is a synthetic opioid that is far more potent than morphine and heroin.³ It is used to manage acute and chronic pain; however, both pharmacological and illicitly produced fentanyl may be abused. Pharmaceutical fentanyl is available in the community as transdermal patches; however, illicitly produced fentanyl may be sold as pills or powder, or it may be mixed with heroin, oxycodone, and occasionally stimulants. Fentanyl pills masquerading as oxycodone, known as “green jellies” or “street oxy,” are now available across Canada.⁴

While some people intentionally seek out fentanyl for abuse, others may consume it unintentionally. Given the potency of fentanyl and the highly variable doses in illicit substances, the risk of overdose is considerable, especially for those who are opioid naive.^{1,5}

In response to the increase in fentanyl-detected deaths, the BC Centre for Disease Control (BCCDC) supported several strategies aimed at reducing harms. In February 2015 the

BCCDC partnered with the RCMP and the Vancouver Police Department to initiate a public messaging campaign intended to increase awareness of fentanyl-related overdoses and recommend precautionary strategies (see Box).⁶

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The BCCDC has also championed overdose prevention, recognition, and response training, including the use of naloxone to reduce severe harms from opioid overdose such as brain damage and death. The BC Take Home Naloxone program, initiated in 2012, is available at 70 sites throughout the province. Training is available for people who use drugs, as well as their

families, friends, and service providers. However, as a prescription-only medication, Take Home Naloxone kits can be prescribed only to people at risk of an overdose. As of April 2015 over 200 out-of-hospital naloxone reversals have been documented in BC.⁷

In addition to the Take Home Naloxone kits dispensed through the program, naloxone can be prescribed by licensed physicians. Naloxone is covered by most private insurance plans. The College of Physicians and Surgeons of BC has also advocated the addition of fentanyl urine testing when investigating cases of suspected opioid misuse.⁸

Illicit fentanyl abuse represents a considerable health risk to people who use drugs in BC. While the increase in fentanyl-detected deaths is alarming, awareness and support of harm reduction strategies, including naloxone, can reduce fentanyl- and opioid-related morbidity and mortality.

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References

Available at bcmj.org.

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Public messaging by the BCCDC regarding illicit fentanyl use in BC.⁶

- Don't use alone
- Start with a small amount of the drug first
- Mixing substances, including alcohol, increases risk of overdose
- Call 911 right away if someone overdoses
- Make a plan/know how to respond in case of OD
- Use Insite if possible [for Vancouver]
- Carry naloxone [for opioid-related events only]