

# CCENDU Drug Alert

## Fentanyl-related Overdoses

This alert is to advise that, as of February 6, 2015, there continues to be reports of fatal and non-fatal overdoses that are suspected or confirmed to involve non-pharmaceutical (illicit) fentanyl. Since June 2013, there have been numerous reports from across Canada of fentanyl appearing in pill and powder form and being sold as oxycodone tablets, heroin or other substances. Fentanyl might also be mixed into other recreational drugs, including stimulants such as cocaine and MDMA.

Anecdotal reports suggest most overdoses appear to be in individuals who thought they were using heroin, oxycodone, cocaine or another substance, but have **mistakenly** taken fentanyl. Many deaths have occurred in adults under the age of 40. In addition to injection, many report oral ingestion, snorting or smoking.

Fentanyl is considerably more toxic than other opioids and is extremely lethal: even small quantities can result in overdose. It is particularly deadly to opioid naïve users — people can die on their first use.

More information on non-pharmaceutical (illicit) fentanyl can be found in the following Alerts issued by the CCENDU network (for the web addresses, see below):<sup>1</sup>

- [Illicit Fentanyl](#)
- [Increasing Availability of Counterfeit Oxycodone Tablets Containing Fentanyl](#)

In light of the continued harms attributable to fentanyl, please share with your networks the following advice provided by our partners at the British Columbia Centre for Disease Control:

- Naloxone is a medicine that reverses overdoses. Widespread availability can save lives. If you have it, use it as indicated. If you do not have it, advocate for access to it.
- Immediate use of naloxone can reverse the effects of fentanyl, but a higher dose than usual might be needed. Further, in large doses fentanyl can take a long time to metabolize and the overdose can return when the naloxone wears off. Therefore, it is very important to call 911. More information can be found at the [B.C. Drug and Poison Information Centre website](#).<sup>2</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> The web addresses for the fentanyl Alerts issued by the CCENDU network are as follows:

- [www.ccsa.ca/Resource Library/CCSA-CCENDU-Drug-Alert-Illicit-Fentanyl-2013-en.pdf](http://www.ccsa.ca/Resource%20Library/CCSA-CCENDU-Drug-Alert-Illicit-Fentanyl-2013-en.pdf)
- [www.ccsa.ca/Resource Library/CCSA-CCENDU-Oxycontin-Fentanyl-Alert-2014-en.pdf](http://www.ccsa.ca/Resource%20Library/CCSA-CCENDU-Oxycontin-Fentanyl-Alert-2014-en.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> The web address for the B.C. Drug and Poison Information Centre is as follows:

- [dpic.org/article/professional/fentanyl-information-health-care-providers](http://dpic.org/article/professional/fentanyl-information-health-care-providers)



- Care must be taken when advising substance-using populations about the dangers of non-pharmaceutical (illicit) fentanyl:
  - Flyers, posters or other advisories should avoid terms that might attract users, such as “potent,” “strong” or “more powerful.” Such terms could inadvertently result in an increase in people seeking out the drug. Better alternatives are “more toxic,” “lethal,” “deadly” and “more concentrated” – terms that imply harm.
  - Date information products so that people know this is a recent concern, not an ongoing issue.
  - Include specific calls to action. For example, advise users that if an overdose is suspected, they should call 911; if they decide to use regardless of the danger, advise them not to use alone and to use slowly.
  - Consider mentioning some of the signs and symptoms of an overdose, so people know what to look out for:
    - Early signs of fentanyl overdose include severe sleepiness; trouble breathing (can sound like laboured snoring); slow, shallow breathing; cold, clammy skin; and unresponsiveness to pain.
    - The Ontario Harm Reduction Distribution Program has a [poster](#) designed to clearly communicate these signs.<sup>3</sup>

Please distribute this alert to those working with drug-using populations, including recreational and club drug users and young adults, and those who are often the first to respond to overdoses (e.g., paramedics, emergency departments).

CCENDU will continue to monitor the situation regarding non-pharmaceutical (illicit) fentanyl in Canada. Please contact [CCENDU@ccsa.ca](mailto:CCENDU@ccsa.ca) if you:

- Have any questions, comments or information to contribute;
- Note inaccurate information contained in this bulletin; or
- Would like to subscribe and receive updates as new information becomes available.

For more information on CCENDU and to review previous CCENDU Alerts and Bulletins please visit [www.ccsa.ca](http://www.ccsa.ca).

### Prepared by the CCSA in partnership with the Canadian Community Epidemiology Network on Drug Use (CCENDU)

The Canadian Community Epidemiology Network on Drug Use (CCENDU) is a nation-wide network of community level partners who share information about local trends and emerging issues in substance use and exchange knowledge and tools to support more effective data collection.

**Disclaimer:** While every effort has been made to identify and compile the best and most reliable information available on the topic, the nature of the alert is such that CCSA cannot confirm the validity of all information included or acquired from links provided. While we have done our utmost to provide correct information, CCSA makes no representations or warranties of any kind, express or implied, about the completeness, accuracy or reliability with respect to the information included in this alert or the information included in the links provided.

ISBN 978-1-77178-222-7

© Canadian Centre on Substance Abuse 2015



Canadian Centre  
on Substance Abuse  
Centre canadien de lutte  
contre les toxicomanies

The Canadian Centre on Substance Abuse changes lives by bringing people and knowledge together to reduce the harm of alcohol and other drugs on society. We partner with public, private and non-governmental organizations to improve the health and safety of Canadians.

CCSA activities and products are made possible through a financial contribution from Health Canada. The views of CCSA do not necessarily represent the views of the Government of Canada.

<sup>3</sup> The web address for the Ontario Harm Reduction Program Poster is as follows:

- <http://www.ohrdp.ca/wp-content/uploads/pdf/SignsSymptoms.pdf>