



Fentanyl Facts for Behavioral Health Providers

What is fentanyl and how does it work in the body?

Fentanyl is a powerful synthetic opioid, similar to morphine but 50 to 100 times more potent. In its prescription form it is prescribed for pain, but fentanyl is also made illegally and distributed as a street drug. Illegal fentanyl is sold as a powder or made into pills that look like real prescription opioids (pain relievers).

Fentanyl works by binding to the body's opioid receptors, which are found in areas of the brain that control pain and emotions. Its effects include euphoria, drowsiness, nausea, confusion, constipation, sedation, tolerance, addiction, respiratory depression and arrest, unconsciousness, coma, and death.

Why is fentanyl a problem in San Diego?

Fentanyl is the most common substance found in opioid overdose deaths in San Diego – teens as young as 14 years old have overdosed and died.

Illegal fentanyl is being mixed with other drugs, such as cocaine, heroin and methamphetamine. This is especially dangerous because people are often unaware that fentanyl has been added. The high potency of fentanyl greatly increases risk of overdose, especially if a person who uses drugs is unaware that a powder or pill contains it. Naloxone is a medicine that can be given to a person to reverse a fentanyl overdose. Multiple naloxone doses might be necessary because of fentanyl's potency.

What Can You Do?

Talk | Discuss with patients the health risks associated with taking pills from an unknown origin. Inform them that there are deadly counterfeit pills circulating in the community. Counterfeit prescription medications have been found to contain illegal forms of fentanyl. Remind patients to never take a pill that has not been specifically prescribed to them.

Screen | Universal screening helps identify the appropriate level of services needed based on the patient's risk level. Clinicians are encouraged to take important steps to provide the best care for their pain patients, including risk stratification through universal screening and psychological assessments, as well as continuous assessments using urine drug testing, medical record audits, checking the prescription drug monitoring program and other techniques. For more information and commonly used screens for the implementation of SBIRT visit SAMHSA.gov.

Treat Opioid Use Disorder in Patients | Medication along with behavioral therapies have been shown to be effective in treating those with an opioid use disorder. MAT (medication assisted treatment) is the use of medications, in combination with counseling and behavioral therapies, to provide a "whole-patient" approach to the treatment of opioid use disorders.

SAMHSA guidelines describe that buprenorphine, methadone and naltrexone are used to treat opioid use disorders. These MAT medications are safe to use for months, years, or even a lifetime. Learn more about MAT for opioid use disorders at SAMHSA.gov.

If you are concerned about a patient's opioid or fentanyl use share the **San Diego County's Access and Crisis line (888) 724-7240** for information about treatment and counseling options.

Take Action | For patients with severe opioid use disorders discuss the importance of having naloxone, an opioid reversal drug, in the home in case of an overdose. Naloxone can be purchased at pharmacies in Arizona without a prescription or free from a local substance abuse coalition. Naloxone is easy to administer and can be lifesaving. To find naloxone near you visit Sdpatf.org. Always call 911 if there is an overdose.

