



2014 Advisory # 3

Cases of fentanyl-associated overdoses in Mid-Atlantic and Northeast United States

February 6, 2014

Since December, 2013, several jurisdictions in the Mid-Atlantic and Northeast United States have recently identified fentanyl in the heroin supply, and have experienced increases in fentanyl-involved overdose deaths. Since December, fentanyl-involved overdose deaths have been reported from Pennsylvania (n=22), Rhode Island (n=15), and two counties in New York State [Monroe (n=9) and Nassau (n=4)].¹ The New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene is not aware of any recent fentanyl-related deaths in New York City. In addition, the New York City Police Department has not seen an increase in fentanyl-positive specimens among confiscated drugs from arrestees. Nonetheless, we would like to make you aware of reports of fentanyl-associated deaths from nearby jurisdictions and share with you the following information about fentanyl.

Clinical Information:

- Fentanyl is a narcotic analgesic. The biological effects of fentanyl are indistinguishable from those of heroin.
- Fentanyl has a shorter duration of effect than heroin.
- Fentanyl is significantly more potent than heroin.
- Treatment is the same as for other opioid overdose, however, larger than usual doses of naloxone (2-10mg) might be required for reversal of the opioid effects.
- Fentanyl is not detected by standard urine opioid immunoassays; therefore, opioid exposure should not be ruled out based on toxicology screen results. Consult your laboratory for preferred testing methods.
- Symptoms of overdose are characteristic of central nervous system depression: lethargy, respiratory depression, pinpoint pupils, change in consciousness, seizure, and/or coma.

In your care of individuals who are substance users, you can educate your patients about overdose prevention strategies, including recommending that patients participate in overdose prevention education at a local harm reduction program, and obtain naloxone for overdose reversal; for further information, contact DOHMH at 347-396-7909 or aptahrijas@health.nyc.gov. Medication-assisted treatment with methadone or buprenorphine also prevents overdose. Treatment locators are available at: www.oasas.ny.gov or www.buprenorphine.samhsa.gov. Referrals for medication-assisted treatment are available at 1-800-LIFENET.

We would like to remind medical providers that they are required to report suspect or confirmed cases of poisoning (including overdose) by drugs or other toxic agents within 24 hours to the

Poison Control Center at 1-800-222-1222 or 212-764-7667 (POISONS). These reports are critical in detecting and preventing overdose outbreaks.

Please share this with any providers you know working with substance users in New York City.

Sincerely,

Hillary Kunins

Hillary Kunins, MD, MPH
Assistant Commissioner
Bureau of Alcohol and Drug Use – Prevention, Care and Treatment

¹ Pennsylvania Department of Health. “Fentanyl-Laced Heroin Compounds – Recommendations for medical providers in Southwestern Pennsylvania,” January 28, 2014; Monroe County Office of the Medical Examiner. “Deaths due to heroin in the Monroe County region 2011-2013. Deaths under investigation that may be linked to fentanyl mixed with heroin or substitution for heroin in street drugs available in our region,” February 4, 2014; Nassau County Office of the Chief Medical Examiner. “Contaminated heroin alert,” Media advisory, January 31, 2014.