

Warning to Alaskans

Most counterfeit pills now contain deadly fentanyl. Even a small amount can kill.

The Alaska Department of Health (DOH) is alerting Alaska residents, families and schools about the threat of overdose due to counterfeit pills containing fentanyl. According to the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA), nationally, 60% of all counterfeit pills now in circulation contain fatal amounts of fentanyl – up from 40% in 2021. Alaska saw a 75% increase in overdose deaths in 2021, with 73% of the opioid overdose deaths involving fentanyl (according to final 2021 data). A very small amount of fentanyl can cause someone to overdose and die. This bulletin contains guidance for Alaskans to help keep people safe.

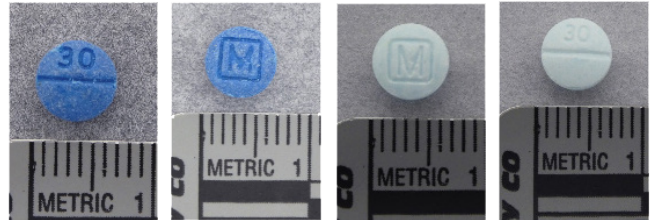
What is fentanyl?

Fentanyl is a synthetic opioid that is 50 times stronger than heroin and 100 times stronger than morphine. Although fentanyl is made and used pharmaceutically, it is also produced illegally in other countries and trafficked into the United States, usually as powder and pills. Fentanyl is frequently added into other substances such as heroin, methamphetamine and cocaine.

In Alaska, fentanyl is commonly seen in blue pills made to look like the pharmaceutical oxycodone. People who sell or purchase drugs may call these pills “M-30s,” “blues,” or “dirty 30’s”. These fake pills are usually blue in color and stamped to look like real oxycodone pills you would get from a pharmacist. Because it takes a very small amount

of fentanyl to cause an overdose, one pill can be deadly. Fentanyl has also been found in other counterfeit pills such as benzodiazepines.

Pictured here are examples of counterfeit pills. Seizure of counterfeit pills containing fentanyl is on the rise.



Why do people use fentanyl, and why is it a threat in Alaska?

Youth and young adults may use drugs for different reasons.

- People may use drugs to cope with emotional and physical pain and stress.
- People may use substances to obtain a feeling of euphoria or other desired moods.
- Youth and young adults may experiment with drugs with their friends or in social settings.

Fake pills are easy to get online, including on social media.

- There are accounts on social media designed to sell pills and other drugs.
- Snapchat is a popular tool for purchasing drugs, because messages disappear.

What people may not know when they use illegal pills:

- It's hard to tell when pills are fake. People may think the pills came from a doctor or pharmacist.
- People may not know if pills contain fentanyl and other dangerous drugs.
- Many people don't know what fentanyl is or that that one pill can be deadly.
- Youth and young adults may also not know how to recognize and respond to an opioid overdose.

In 2021, Alaska experienced one fentanyl-related overdose death among youth aged 0-17 years and 15 fentanyl-related overdose deaths among young adults aged 18-24 years.¹

In a 2021 national survey, 59% of youth aged 13-24 hadn't heard of fentanyl. Only 37% believed that fentanyl was "extremely dangerous."²

In 2019, 15.1% of traditional high school students in Alaska reported ever taking prescription pain medicine without a doctor's prescription or differently than how a doctor told them to use it.³

How can families and schools work together to reduce youth overdose risk?

Families need to be educated on the dangers of fentanyl, and that even one pill can be dangerous and even fatal. Schools can support families by sharing the following messages:

- Assume all pills offered to you are fake and contain fentanyl. You can't smell or taste fentanyl. You cannot tell if a pill is fake just by looking at it.
- Do not take any pill that you do not directly get from a doctor or pharmacist. Pills purchased online or from social media are not safe.
- Every pill is different – even if one pill seems safe, another pill from the same batch may contain fentanyl.
- The amount of fentanyl in one pill can vary widely. Splitting a pill may not be a safe option, because all the fentanyl could be in one half of the pill.
- If you or someone around you takes an illegal pill, know how to recognize an opioid overdose. Never use illegal pills when you're alone.
- Provide easy access to naloxone, also known as Narcan®. Naloxone is a drug that reverses the effects of an opioid overdose. Naloxone can be administered as an injection or as a nasal spray.

During 2020–2021, EMS in Alaska responded to 58 suspected overdoses among people aged 0-19 years.⁴

Opioids include heroin, fentanyl, and prescription medications like oxycodone.

Know the signs of an opioid overdose:

- Unconsciousness, or inability to wake up
- Limp body
- Falling asleep, extreme drowsiness
- Slow, shallow, irregular or no breathing
- Pale, blue, cold and/or clammy skin
- Choking, snoring or gurgling sounds
- Slow or no heartbeat
- Call 911 if you think someone is overdosing.

What should schools do?

- Share this bulletin with parents and caregivers.
- Train school staff to know the signs of an opioid overdose (see above).
- Have naloxone available in case an overdose occurs on campus.
- Work with school and school district to create new drug education curriculums that include current information on fentanyl. Schools can facilitate this education through media campaigns and other primary prevention strategies.
- Engage with your local public health centers and public safety agencies to identify and implement strategies meaningful to your local jurisdiction.

What should parents do?

- Know the signs of an opioid overdose.
- Talk to family members about the dangers of pills and fentanyl. Encouraging open communication about risky behaviors and emphasizing the dangers of counterfeit pills and fentanyl could save someone's life. Let family members know it's okay to ask for mental health support.
- If you are worried a family member may be at risk of an overdose, have naloxone in your home and make sure everyone knows how to access it. Find information on naloxone and how to obtain it here.
- Get rid of unused or expired medications.

Credit to The Oregon-Idaho High Intensity Drug Trafficking Area (HIDTA)

1 Alaska Division of Public Health, Health Analytics and Vital Records Section. Accessed 3/9/2023

2 www.songforcharlie.org/data

3 2019 Alaska Youth Risk Behavior Survey

4 Alaska's Biospatial Overdose Dashboard. Accessed 5/2/2022

For questions, please email osmap@alaska.gov. For more information visit opioids.alaska.gov.

For school health information, please contact the Office of School Health and Safety at schoolhealthandsafety@alaska.gov.

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