

Drug Facts: Fentanyl



What Is Fentanyl?

Fentanyl is a powerful synthetic opioid that is similar to morphine but is 50 to 100 times more potent. It is a prescription drug that is also made and used illegally. Like morphine, it is a medicine that is typically used to treat patients with severe pain, especially after surgery. It is also used to treat patients with chronic pain who are physically tolerant to other opioids. Tolerance occurs when a person needs a higher and/or more frequent amount of a drug to get the desired effects.

Fentanyl has been responsible for thousands of overdose deaths. Between May 1, 2020 and April 2021, 100,306 people died from drug overdoses in the United States. Synthetic opioids (primarily fentanyl) accounted for the bulk of those deaths—approximately 64,000 (Centers for Disease Control, www.cdc.gov, 11/17/2021).

What Are The Common Street Names For Fentanyl?

Street names for fentanyl include Apace, China Girl, China Town, China White, Dance Fever, Goodfellas, Great Bear, He-Man, Poison and Tango & Cash.

How Do People Use Fentanyl?

When prescribed by a doctor, fentanyl can be given as a shot, a patch that is put on a person's skin, or as lozenges that are sucked like cough drops.

The fentanyl that is most often associated with recent overdoses is made in labs. This synthetic fentanyl is sold illegally as a powder, dropped onto blotter paper, put in eye droppers and nasal sprays, or made into pills that look like other prescription opioids

Some drug dealers mix fentanyl with other drugs, such as heroin, cocaine, methamphetamine, and MDMA because it takes very little to produce a high with fentanyl, making it a cheaper option. This is especially risky when people taking drugs don't realize they might contain fentanyl as a cheap but dangerous additive. They might be taking stronger opioids than their bodies are used to and can be more likely to overdose.

- Fentanyl is a powerful synthetic opioid that is similar to morphine but is 50 to 100 times more potent. In its prescription form it is prescribed for pain, but fentanyl is also made illegally.
- Fentanyl and other synthetic opioids are the most common drugs involved in overdose deaths.
- Fentanyl is being mixed with other drugs, such as cocaine, heroin, methamphetamine, and MDMA. This is especially dangerous because people are often unaware that fentanyl has been added.
- 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.

How Does Fentanyl Affect The Brain?

Like heroin, morphine, and other opioid drugs, fentanyl works by binding to the body's opioid receptors, which are found in areas of the brain that control pain and emotions. After taking opioids many times, the brain adapts to the drug, diminishing its sensitivity, making it hard to feel pleasure from anything besides the drug. When people become addicted, drug seeking and drug use take over their lives. Fentanyl's effects include:

- Extreme happiness
- Confusion
- Problems breathing
- Drowsiness
- Constipation
- Unconsciousness
- Nausea
- Sedation



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Can A Person Overdose On Fentanyl?

Yes, a person can overdose on fentanyl. An overdose occurs when a drug produces serious adverse effects and life-threatening symptoms. When someone overdoses on fentanyl, their breathing can slow or stop. This can decrease the amount of oxygen that reaches the brain, a condition called hypoxia. Hypoxia can lead to a coma and permanent brain damage, and even death.

How Can A Fentanyl Overdose Be Treated?

Naloxone is a medicine that can treat a fentanyl overdose when given right away. It works by rapidly binding to opioid receptors and blocking the effects of opioid drugs. It can very quickly restore normal respiration to a person whose breathing has slowed or stopped as a result of overdosing on fentanyl, heroin, or other opioids.

Because drug dealers mix fentanyl with other drugs, individuals who use illicit substances or counterfeit pills and their loved ones should obtain naloxone and keep it on their person or in their home. Naloxone is available as a prepackaged nasal spray or auto-injection device. Both products are packaged in a carton containing two doses to allow for repeat dosing if needed. They are relatively easy to use in response to an opioid overdose. If a person overdoses, the first dose of naloxone should be administered and 911 should be called immediately. Naloxone usually works within 2 to 5 minutes. If the individual does not respond, the second dose should be administered.

Connecticut residents can obtain naloxone from trained, certified pharmacists (visit www.ct.gov/DCP for a list) or from their DMHAS-funded [Regional Behavioral Health Action Organization](#) (RBHAO).

Can Fentanyl Use Lead To Addiction?

Yes. Fentanyl is addictive because of its potency. A person taking prescription fentanyl as instructed by a doctor can experience dependence, which is characterized by withdrawal symptoms when the drug is stopped. An individual can be dependent on a substance without being addicted, but dependence can sometimes lead to addiction.

People addicted to fentanyl who stop using it can have severe withdrawal symptoms that begin as early as a few hours after the drug was last taken. These symptoms include:

- Muscle and bone pain
- Sleep problems
- Diarrhea and vomiting
- Cold flashes with goose bumps
- Uncontrollable leg movements
- Severe cravings

These symptoms can be extremely uncomfortable and are the reason many people find it so difficult to stop taking fentanyl. There are medicines to help with the withdrawal process for fentanyl and other opioids.

How Is Fentanyl Addiction Treated?

Medication in conjunction with behavioral therapies has been shown to be effective in treating people with a fentanyl addiction.

- Medication: Buprenorphine and methadone work by binding to the same opioid receptors in the brain as fentanyl, reducing cravings and withdrawal symptoms. Another medicine, naltrexone, blocks opioid receptors and prevents fentanyl from having an effect. People can discuss treatment options with their healthcare provider.
- Counseling: Behavioral therapies for addiction to opioids like fentanyl can help people modify their attitudes and behaviors related to drug use; effectively manage triggers and stress; increase healthy life skills; and help them stick with their medication. Examples include cognitive behavioral therapy, contingency management, and motivational interviewing.

Connecticut Resources

CT Department of Mental
Health and Addiction Services

www.ct.gov/DMHAS

24/7 Access Line

1.800.563.4086

CT Department of Consumer
Protection—Naloxone
Pharmacies

www.ct.gov/DCP

National Resources

Substance Abuse and Mental
Health Services Administration

www.samhsa.gov

National Institute on Drug
Abuse

www.nida.nih.gov

