



County of Santa Cruz

HEALTH SERVICES AGENCY

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Overdoses and deaths due to counterfeit drugs contaminated with fentanyl

CURRENT SITUATION

California Department of Public Health (CDPH) recently issued a statewide Drug Overdose Health Alert in response to an increased number of overdoses and deaths reported by Sacramento County and several reports of similar overdoses in other counties.

Since late March, Sacramento County has reported 52 overdoses of illicitly obtained drugs, including 12 deaths. Contra Costa County reported 10 overdoses and Santa Clara County reported two overdose deaths. Many of these overdoses and deaths were the result of consumption of pills that strongly resembled the prescription opioid drug Norco (hydrocodone/acetaminophen) but actually contained an undetermined amount of fentanyl, a powerful synthetic opiate analgesic much more potent than morphine and heroin.

BACKGROUND

In November 2015, Santa Cruz County Health Services Agency (HSA) issued a Public Health Alert regarding two overdose deaths likely linked to consuming fentanyl-contaminated street Xanax. At the time, other Bay Area counties also experienced similar overdoses related to street Xanax possibly laced with fentanyl. San Francisco recently reported verified fentanyl-containing counterfeit pills of oxycodone, Xanax, and Norco.

Fentanyl is an extremely potent, short-acting opioid that can cause overdose and death. Although pharmaceutical fentanyl can be diverted for misuse, most cases of fentanyl-related morbidity and mortality have been linked to illicitly manufactured fentanyl and fentanyl analogs, collectively referred to as non-pharmaceutical fentanyl (NPF). NPF is sold via illicit drug markets for its heroin-like effect and often mixed with heroin and/or cocaine as a combination product – with or without the user's knowledge – to increase its euphoric effects. Counterfeit street drugs may contain other toxic chemicals or have varying levels of fentanyl in each batch. Even pills produced in the same batch may have widely varying levels of fentanyl, some of them lethal.

INFORMATION

Signs of opioid overdose:

- Face is pale and/or clammy to touch
- Body is limp
- Fingernails or lips have blue, gray or purple color
- Person is vomiting or making gurgling noises
- Person won't wake up from sleep or is unable to speak
- Breathing slows or even stops
- Heartbeat is very slow or stopped

Signs of opioid overmedication (can progress to overdose):

- Unusual sleepiness or drowsiness, hard to wake from sleep
- Person is confused, has slurred speech or intoxicated behavior
- Slow or shallow breathing
- Pinpoint pupils
- Slow heartbeat, low blood pressure

Naloxone (Narcan) is a medication that can reverse the effects of opioids and is given in the event of an opioid overdose. This medication can be administered by first responders and hospital staff. Naloxone can also be obtained by prescription from a physician or over-the-counter at pharmacies. People can check with their doctor or pharmacist about the availability of naloxone. The public can also obtain naloxone for a small donation or free at **Janus of Santa Cruz** (831-425-0112).

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Do not take prescription-type pills that have not been prescribed by and obtained from a physician or pharmacy.
- If you know someone who has used painkiller pills before, warn them to only use prescription pills that they have obtained from their physician or pharmacy.
- If someone is experiencing an opioid overdose:
 - Call 911 and give naloxone (Narcan)
 - Give rescue breaths every 5 seconds and/or follow the 911 dispatcher's instructions
 - After naloxone, stay with person for at least three hours or until help arrives
- If you or someone you know is struggling with substance abuse, please contact the following programs:
 - Santa Cruz County Health Services Agency Alcohol and Drug Abuse Services (831-454-4050, www.santacruzhealth.org/recoverywave/)
 - Janus of Santa Cruz (831-425-0112, www.januscc.org)

REFERENCES

CDC MMWR: Counterfeit Norco Poisoning Outbreak – San Francisco Bay Area, California, March 25 - April 5, 2016 (4/29/2016):

<http://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/volumes/65/wr/mm6516e1.htm>

CDPH Issues Health Alert to Stop Fentanyl-Related Deaths (4/8/2016):

<https://www.cdph.ca.gov/Pages/NR16-020.aspx>

CDPH Drug Overdose Health Alert: Fentanyl-Contaminated Street Norco (4/8/2016):

<https://www.cdph.ca.gov/Documents/drug%20overdose%20health%20alert%204.18.16.pdf>

CDC Health Advisory Increases in Fentanyl Drug Confiscations and Fentanyl-related Overdose Fatalities (10/26/2015) <http://emergency.cdc.gov/han/han00384.asp>

SAMHSA Opioid Overdose Toolkit (2014)

http://store.samhsa.gov/shin/content/SMA13-4742/Overdose_Toolkit_2014_Jan.pdf

CDC Health Advisory Recommendations for Laboratory Testing for Acetyl Fentanyl and Patient Evaluation and Treatment for Overdose with Synthetic Opioid (6/20/2013)

<http://emergency.cdc.gov/han/han00350.asp>