

DPHHS HAN

Information Sheet



DATE

January 23, 2023

SUBJECT

Increase in Fatal and Non-fatal Overdoses Likely Associated with Non-pharmaceutical Fentanyl, Montana, January 2023

BACKGROUND

Fentanyl, a synthetic and short-acting opioid analgesic, is 50-100 times more potent than morphine and approved for managing acute or chronic pain associated with advanced cancer.¹ 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).² 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. While NPF-related overdoses can be reversed with naloxone, a higher dose or multiple number of doses per overdose event may be required to revive a patient due to the high potency of NPF.^{3,4}

INFORMATION

The Montana Department of Public Health and Human Services (DPHHS) in conjunction with local law enforcement have identified a sharp increase in both fatal and non-fatal overdoses across the state in the last 10 days. From January 11-21, 2023, there have been at least 28 non-fatal overdoses and eight fatal overdoses suspected to be due to NPF.

- The age range of patients was 19 and 66 years old, with most between the ages of 20 and 40 years old. Nineteen patients were male and seventeen were female.
- Many of the patients had a prior history of opioid or other substance misuse, and several reported smoking fentanyl prior to their overdose.
- Some patients required several doses of naloxone to reverse their overdose, with reports of 12 milligrams used for 4 individuals.
- Identified overdoses occurred in Cascade, Choteau, Custer, Flathead, Gallatin, Lake, Lewis and Clark, Missoula, Ravalli, Sheridan, Silver Bow, and Yellowstone counties.

Expanding Naloxone Access

The State of Montana has issued a [Montana Statewide Standing Order for Naloxone Opioid Antagonists](#) that allows Montanans to access naloxone through federal grants for free. Naloxone is a safe medication that can reverse a suspected opioid-related overdose.

Community organizations, law enforcement agencies, detention facilities, EMS, and others can acquire naloxone for free, to have on hand for staff and/or distribute to people at risk of experiencing or witnessing an overdose, through www.naloxone.mt.gov.

Naloxone is available to individuals at various locations which can be found on the www.naloxone.mt.gov map.

Formal training is not required but is available, basic instructions are provided with the medication.

[Montana's Good Samaritan Law](#) provides legal protection to those who administer naloxone, even if they are using substances too.

Naloxone is also available from some [pharmacy](#) locations pending insurance approval.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Local Health Departments

1. Raise awareness among key partners and stakeholders to the widening profile of those at risk for fentanyl overdose, which increasingly includes persons misusing diverted prescribed oral pain and sedative medications.
2. Develop public health messaging about fentanyl, including fentanyl-laced counterfeit pills and fentanyl-related compounds that emphasizes the toxicity and potential lethality of the drug versus its high "potency." The messaging should include warnings of the highly variable content of fentanyl present in illicit products, which further elevates risk of overdose.^{5,6}
3. Ensure your community is aware that naloxone is available to order for free through www.naloxone.mt.gov and can be distributed to people who use drugs and those who are likely to witness an overdose.
4. Continue to encourage eligible recipients, including individuals at-risk for opioid-related overdose and family members and friends of those at-risk, to carry naloxone. Educate eligible recipients on the importance of activating Emergency Medical Services (EMS) during an overdose event as the naloxone reversal effects may be temporary and overdose-related respiratory depression may return. Encourage those who are at risk of an overdose to not use alone and preferably with others knowledgeable about the administration of naloxone and with a supply of naloxone on hand.
5. Seek community support through local safe syringe programs and other organizations that work directly with people who use drugs.

EMS and Law Enforcement

1. Be aware of the potential for increased incidence of overdose in your community related to NPF and for the potential need for additional supply of naloxone on hand.
2. Be aware of the potential for increased incidence of overdose with individuals who are being arrested, are in custody, or are incarcerated in a detention facility.
3. Prioritize and expedite laboratory testing of drug samples taken from drug overdose scenes.
4. Continue to monitor individuals who have overdosed on fentanyl after receipt of bystander naloxone given the risk for recurrent respiratory depression once the temporary naloxone effect has ended.
5. EMTs should ensure they are filling out run reports that properly reflect opioid overdoses to aid in continued tracking:
 - a. [Guidance for documenting overdose-related EMS incidents \(mt.gov\)](#)
 - b. [Guidance for Documenting Overdose-related EMS Incidents - YouTube](#)

DPHHS Opioid Resources

1. [Montana Standing Order for Naloxone Opioid Antagonists](#)
<https://dphhs.mt.gov/assets/publichealth/EMSTS/opioids/MontanaStandingOrderforNaloxoneOpioidAntagonists.pdf>
2. [Order Naloxone](#)
www.naloxone.mt.gov
3. [Montana Good Samaritan Law](#)
https://leg.mt.gov/bills/mca/title_0270/chapter_0010/part_0070/section_0140/0270-0010-0070-0140.html

4. [Montana Naloxone Pharmacies](https://dphhs.mt.gov/assets/amdd/Naloxone/PharmaciesWithNaloxone.pdf)
https://dphhs.mt.gov/assets/amdd/Naloxone/PharmaciesWithNaloxone.pdf
5. [Written Guidance for Documenting Overdose](https://dphhs.mt.gov/assets/publichealth/EMSTS/EMS/ODEMSGuidanceADA.pdf)
https://dphhs.mt.gov/assets/publichealth/EMSTS/EMS/ODEMSGuidanceADA.pdf
6. [Video Guidance for Documenting Overdose](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JMbjFxEvHA)
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JMbjFxEvHA
7. [DPHHS Naloxone and Opioid Response](http://www.naloxone.mt.gov)
www.naloxone.mt.gov
8. [DPHHS Opioid Prevention Program](https://dphhs.mt.gov/opioid/index)
https://dphhs.mt.gov/opioid/index
9. [Drug Poisoning Deaths in Montana, 2009-2020](https://dphhs.mt.gov/assets/publichealth/EMSTS/opioids/DrugPoisoningDeaths22.pdf)
https://dphhs.mt.gov/assets/publichealth/EMSTS/opioids/DrugPoisoningDeaths22.pdf
10. [Montana Implementation Guide for Access to Naloxone Opioid Antagonists](https://dphhs.mt.gov/assets/publichealth/EMSTS/opioids/MontanaImplementationGuideforIncreasedNaloxoneUpdatedMay2019.pdf)
https://dphhs.mt.gov/assets/publichealth/EMSTS/opioids/MontanaImplementationGuideforIncreasedNaloxoneUpdatedMay2019.pdf
11. [Opioids Overdose Recognition and Response Guide \(Pamphlet\)](https://dphhs.mt.gov/assets/publichealth/EMSTS/opioids/Naloxonebrochure.pdf)
https://dphhs.mt.gov/assets/publichealth/EMSTS/opioids/Naloxonebrochure.pdf

References

1. Algren D, Monteilh C, Rubin C, et al. Fentanyl-associated fatalities among illicit drug users in Wayne County, Michigan (July 2005-May 2006). Journal Of Medical Toxicology: Official Journal of the American College of Medical Toxicology [serial online]. March 2013; 9(1):106-115.
2. U.S. Department of Justice, Drug Enforcement Administration, DEA Investigative Reporting, January 2015
3. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Notes from the field: Acetyl fentanyl overdose fatalities -Rhode Island, March-May 2013. MMWR: Morbidity & Mortality Weekly Report [serial online]. August 30, 2013; 62(34):703-704. <http://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/preview/mmwrhtml/mm6234a5.htm>
4. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Recommendations for Laboratory testing for Acetyl Fentanyl and Patient Evaluation and Treatment for Overdose for Synthetic Opioids. HAN Health Advisory. June 20, 2013. <http://stacks.cdc.gov/view/cdc/25259>
5. Canadian Center on Substance Abuse Bulletin. Novel synthetic opioids in Counterfeit pharmaceuticals and other illicit street drugs. June 2016. <http://www.ccsa.ca/Resource%20Library/CCSACCENDU-Novel-Synthetic-OpioidsBulletin-2016-en.pdf>
6. Sutter ME, Gerona R, Davis MT, et al. Fatal fentanyl: one pill can kill. Acad Emerg Med. [Epub ahead of print June 20, 2016] <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/acem.13034/abstract>