

Fentanyl (NAABT Summary Sheet, 6/17/2006)

Fentanyl use in combination with street drugs leading to death in some cases

A deadly drug combination has been eliciting a great deal of media attention lately. Dozens of individuals in the Philadelphia, Chicago, St. Louis, and Detroit areas have overdosed on a combination of heroin (or cocaine) and fentanyl, a narcotic analgesic that is 50 to 100 times more potent than morphine - and some have died. A powerful opiate pain reliever typically used after surgery or to treat patients with severe pain, fentanyl, like many prescription medications, can be deadly when abused.

Why would anyone risk death for the high of this powerful drug? For some addicts, it is an unwitting mistake, as they often do not know the composition of what they buy on the street. Incredibly, other addicts intentionally make this choice as part of a desperate search for an increasingly better high. The reason for this behavior is addiction, or one of its fundamental features: the ability to alter peoples' brains such that they can no longer exercise proper judgment or experience normal pleasures. Along with displacing natural "reinforcers" such as food, family, and friends, drugs of abuse also eventually lose their ability to reward, placing the addict on a compulsive quest for more drug and for greater drug potency as their reward circuitry becomes increasingly blunted and desensitized.

Fentanyl's superior potency makes it a good medication for pain and a good target for abuse. And while it may not be as familiar as other prescription opiates or street drugs like heroin, it is causing a wave of overdoses and deaths, not from its diversion for non-medical purposes, but likely a result of illicit drug manufacturing. Combined with heroin and used in powder form, fentanyl represents an intersection of prescription drug with street drug and reminds us of the potential dangers associated with the abuse of both - particularly as the abuse of prescription painkillers continues to grow in young adults and youth. We must therefore be vigilant in educating ourselves and those around us on the dangers associated with all drug abuse.

—source *Nora D. Volkow, M.D.*, Director, NIDA

Fentanyl (source: <http://www.drugabuse.gov/drugpages/fentanyl.html>)

- Fentanyl is a powerful synthetic opiate analgesic similar to but more potent than morphine. It is typically used to treat patients with severe pain, or to manage pain after surgery. It is also sometimes used to treat people with chronic pain who are physically tolerant to opiates. It is a schedule II prescription drug.

- In its prescription form, fentanyl is known as Actiq, Duragesic, and Sublimaze. Street names for the drug include Apache, China girl, China white, dance fever, friend, goodfella, jackpot, murder 8, TNT, as well as Tango and Cash.
- Like heroin, morphine, and other opioid drugs, fentanyl works by binding to the body's opiate receptors, highly concentrated in areas of the brain that control pain and emotions. When opiate drugs bind to these receptors, they can drive up dopamine levels in the brain's reward areas, producing a state of euphoria and relaxation. Medications called opiate receptor antagonists act by blocking the effects of opiate drugs. Naloxone is one such antagonist. Overdoses of fentanyl should be treated immediately with an opiate antagonist.
- When prescribed by a physician, fentanyl is often administered via injection, transdermal patch, or in lozenge form. However, the type of fentanyl associated with recent overdoses was produced in clandestine laboratories and mixed with (or substituted for) heroin in a powder form.
- Mixing fentanyl with street-sold heroin or cocaine markedly amplifies their potency and potential dangers. Effects include: euphoria, drowsiness/respiratory depression and arrest, nausea, confusion, constipation, sedation, unconsciousness, coma, tolerance, and addiction.

Links for more information:

<http://www.drugs.com/fentanyl.html>
<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fentanyl>

Recent News stories:

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