
Fentanyl for First Responders

Fentanyl is a synthetic opioid that mimics the effects of morphine, but is 50-100 times more potent. Currently fentanyl is listed as a Schedule II prescription drug. Prescribed fentanyl is used in both human and veterinary medicine as an anesthetic during surgery or to manage post-surgery or chronic pain. Because fentanyl is extremely potent and widely available, it has made its way into the illegal-drug market where it is being used to cut heroine and other controlled substances in order to increase their potency.

An Increase in Opioid Deaths

The introduction of fentanyl to the illegal-drug market has greatly increased the number of opioid-related overdoses and deaths. In 2015 the Centers for Disease Control reported 33,091 deaths from opioid overdoses. Of those, 9,580 were caused by synthetic opioids such as fentanyl and fentanyl-related substances, a 72.2% increase over the previous year.

Fentanyl can be ingested orally, inhaled, or absorbed through the skin or eyes making the drug a significant threat for first responders. Any substance expected to contain fentanyl should be treated with extreme caution as exposure to even small amounts can cause serious health risks like respiratory depression or even death.

General Safety Recommendations

Fentanyl has been identified in powders, pills, capsules, liquids, and on blotter papers, so any suspect substance must be treated with extreme caution. Accidental exposure can occur in numerous situations such as responding to an overdose, serving search or arrest warrants, processing drug evidence, or processing contaminated non-drug evidence (e.g., drug paraphernalia, drug proceeds, pill presses, etc.).

Because fentanyl can be absorbed into the body via so many means (e.g., transdermal, mucous membranes, inhalations, ingestion), personal protective equipment (PPE) should be worn when handling suspect substances or when entering a room or area

where fentanyl may be present. Please note that police dogs are also at risk of accidentally coming into contact with potentially fatal amounts of fentanyl. Precautions should be taken to safeguard their health as well.

Individual PPE Kits

The Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) recommends that first responders who may encounter fentanyl or fentanyl-related substances maintain the following items in a PPE kit.

- Nitrile gloves
- N-95 dust masks
- Sturdy eye protection
- Paper coveralls – shoe covers
- Naloxone Injector

The DEA also recommends that first responders who encounter fentanyl or related substances NOT take samples or disturb any powders without wearing PPE. In situations where large amounts of fentanyl are present and exposure risk is high, specially trained personnel should be brought in with Level A PPE (Level A suit and self-contained breathing apparatus) to assess the environment before proceeding.

What This Means to Counties

The likelihood of first responders encountering fentanyl is high as the opioid epidemic continues to spread. Educate your county's first responders about fentanyl and the risk of accidental exposure as well as the need for PPE when dealing with possible fentanyl contamination. For more information on the risks and a more in-depth overview on the topic, visit dea.gov/druginfo/Fentanyl_BriefingGuideforFirstResponders_June2017.pdf, you may also contact CTSI at 303 861 0507. 