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To: ALL HEALTH CARE PROFESSIONALS
From: Ron Kirschner, MD, Medical Director, Nebraska Regional Poison Center
Subject: Fentanyl-substituted heroin
Date: 3/3/15

- Our law enforcement colleagues have confirmed that concentrated fentanyl-substituted heroin is present in our area.
- The synthetic opioid fentanyl, which is sold as a substitute for heroin, is thought to be about 50 times more potent than heroin.
- Because of its higher potency, fentanyl-contaminated or substituted heroin has been associated with clusters of opioid fatalities throughout the country for decades.
- Respiratory depression or arrest occur when victims abuse what they believe to be their usual dose of heroin but are then affected by the more potent drug.
- Most recently, fatalities associated with heroin containing the fentanyl analog acetyl fentanyl have been reported in the New England states. In some fatalities, no other drugs of abuse besides acetyl fentanyl were found.
- Fentanyl is not detected by standard urine drug screens. Assays can be performed by specialized reference labs but would not be available in real time.
- Like other opioids, fentanyl does respond to naloxone. Standard naloxone dosing is usually effective but with larger amounts of fentanyl or some analogs, higher doses of naloxone may sometimes be needed.
- Please consider contacting the Poison Center if heroin or fentanyl exposure is suspected.

References

- CDC, Acetyl fentanyl overdose fatalities – Rhode Island, March-May 2013. *MMWR Morb Mortal Wkly Rep.* 2013 Aug 30; 62 (34):703-4
- CDC, Nonpharmaceutical fentanyl-related deaths --- Multiple States, April 2005--March 2007. *MMWR Morb Mortal Wkly Rep.* 2008 July 25 57(29);793-796
- www.deadiversion.usdoj.gov/drug_chem_info/acetylfentanyl.pdf

Our trained staff of nurse specialists in poison information and physician toxicologists is available 24 hours a day to answer your questions and can be reached at 1-800-222-1222.