



From: Ron Kirschner, MD, Medical Director  
To: ALL HEALTH CARE PROFESSIONALS  
Subject: Counterfeit pills and other sources of fentanyl intoxication  
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- Because of its higher potency, fentanyl-contaminated or fentanyl-substituted heroin has been associated with clusters of opioid fatalities throughout the country.
- In recent years deaths due to fentanyl sold as, or mixed with, heroin have been increasing. This year the more potent fentanyl analog carfentanil is suspected in a wave of Ohio and Indiana fatalities (K. Rogers).
- The increase correlates with a rise in seizures of illicitly manufactured fentanyl since 2013 (Gladden).
- Fentanyl has also been found in illicitly sold counterfeit oral medications.
- In 2015 five California patients had prolonged coma after ingesting “Xanax” pills purchased on the street. Fentanyl blood or urine levels were documented in 4 of these patients. The pills, which appeared similar to Xanax 2 mg, were found to contain fentanyl and the thienodiazepine sedative etizolam (Arens).
- A CA patient developed profound coma after ingesting Norco purchased on the street. Supratherapeutic serum fentanyl levels were documented, but the pills were unavailable for analysis (Armenian).
- A Texas man with naloxone-responsive coma admitted to “vaping” a “synthetic opium” liquid using an e-cigarette. Although no body fluid levels were documented, the website where the product was purchased identified it as the fentanyl analog acetylfentanyl (J. Rogers).
- Fentanyl should be suspected in patients with CNS/respiratory depression that responds to naloxone but urine drug screens that are negative for opiates. It can be detected by specialized reference labs, but results would not be available in real time.
- Treatment should include naloxone and supportive care, with intubation and mechanical ventilation as needed.
- Although fentanyl intoxication usually responds to standard naloxone doses, carfentanil and other designer opioids may require higher dosing.

#### References

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Rogers J. Acetylfentanyl: an emerging drug of abuse. *J Emerg Med* 2016; 50: 433  
Rogers K. Elephant tranquilizer could be linked to a wave of heroin overdoses in the Midwest. *NY Times* 8/26/16

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