

PUBLIC HEALTH & SAFETY ADVISORY ON FENTANYL

ADVISORY CONCERNING FENTANYL AND FENTANYL-LACED SUBSTANCES

The Tennessee Department of Health, Tennessee Department of Mental Health and Substance Abuse Services, Tennessee Department of Safety & Homeland Security and the Tennessee Bureau of Investigation urge Tennesseans to have heightened awareness about misuse of fentanyl and the risks for overdose deaths associated with improper use, including the substantial risk posed by counterfeit prescription or other illegal drugs that may contain fentanyl or similar powerful compounds.

1. Fentanyl is an extremely powerful synthetic opioid similar to morphine, but is 50 to 100 times more potent.ⁱ ⁱⁱ It is legally used to manage intense pain after surgery and sometimes to treat chronic pain.ⁱⁱⁱ In prescription form, it is known by such names as Actiq[®], Duragesic[®] and Sublimaze[®]. Fentanyl is an opioid analgesic, a type of drug that binds with opioid receptors and blocks the transmission of pain signals to the brain.^{iv}
2. Non-prescription fentanyl sold through the illegal drug market can be used as a stand-alone substance or mixed with other substances, including heroin. It can be delivered in several formats, including as a powder, transdermal patch, nasal spray or in counterfeit tablets disguised as other prescription drugs.^v ^{vi} The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reports fentanyl is pressed into counterfeit tablets mimicking commonly misused prescription opioids such as hydrocodone and oxycodone.^{vii} A Feb. 22, 2017 article in the New England Journal of Medicine reported a recent analysis in Canada showed fentanyl present in 89 percent of seized counterfeit Xanax (alprazolam), Norco (acetaminophen-hydrocodone) and other medications.^{viii}
3. The U.S. Drug Enforcement Agency also addressed counterfeit pills, reporting “in many cases, the shape, colorings and markings were consistent with authentic prescription medications and the presence of fentanyl was only detected after laboratory analysis.”^{ix} The DEA reports non-pharmaceutical fentanyl is often packaged as a powder form in waxed envelopes or glassine bags stamped with brand names such as “Ghost,” “Get Right,” “El Chapo” and “56 Nights.”^x Some instances of fentanyl pain-relief patches being cut up and smoked or ingested have been reported.^{xi}
4. The Tennessee Bureau of Investigation confirms law enforcement officials in Tennessee have made several kilo-plus size seizures of fentanyl analogues across Tennessee, in forms such as heroin and numerous counterfeit versions of hydrocodone, oxycodone, Percocet and other commonly misused pain relief medications. A Tennessee law enforcement agency in 2015 recovered what appeared to be several 30mg pills of oxycodone during a traffic stop. Each was the same size and featured the signature A/215 stamp characteristic of oxycodone. However, laboratory analysis performed by TBI forensic scientists indicated the pills were counterfeit and did not contain oxycodone. Instead, they contained fentanyl.

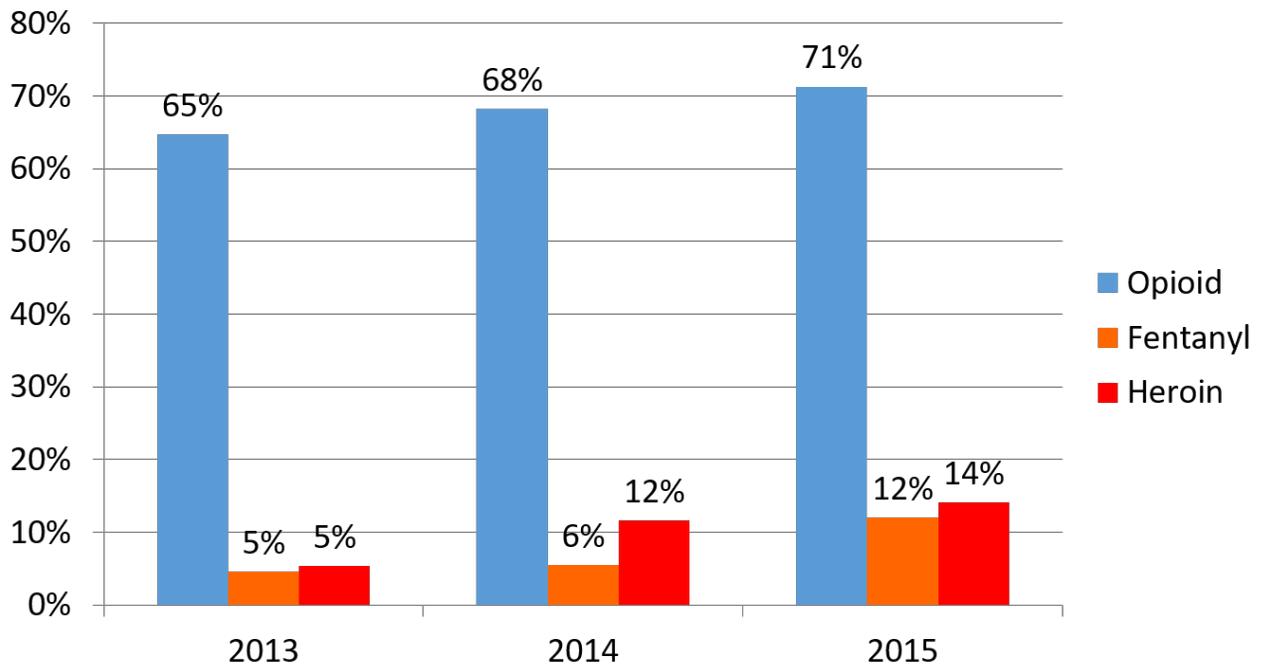


Photo Courtesy of Tennessee Bureau of Investigation.

5. In August 2016, the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention issued a Health Alert Network update advising law enforcement to use extreme caution when handling suspected illicitly manufactured fentanyl, white powders and unknown substances.^{xii} Tennessee residents finding an unknown substance or pill they suspect might contain fentanyl should not handle it; the safest action is to notify local law enforcement for safe disposal. Drugs should never be flushed down toilets or sinks.
6. The U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration, in 2015, issued a nationwide alert on fentanyl as a threat to health and public safety.^{xiii} That alert quoted DEA Administrator Michele M. Leonhart: “Drug incidents and overdoses related to fentanyl are occurring at an alarming rate throughout the United States and represent a significant threat to public health and safety. Fentanyl is extremely dangerous to law enforcement and anyone else who comes in contact with it. We have lost too many Americans to drug overdoses and we strongly encourage parents, caregivers, teachers, local law enforcement and mentors to firmly and passionately educate others about the dangers of drug abuse, and to seek immediate help and treatment for those addicted to drugs.”

7. From 2013 to 2015 in Tennessee, the appearance of fentanyl in drugs associated with overdose deaths has more than doubled, from five percent in 2013 to 12 percent in 2015. See chart below, representing drugs present in overdose deaths in the state*:

Opioids Present In Overdose Deaths*

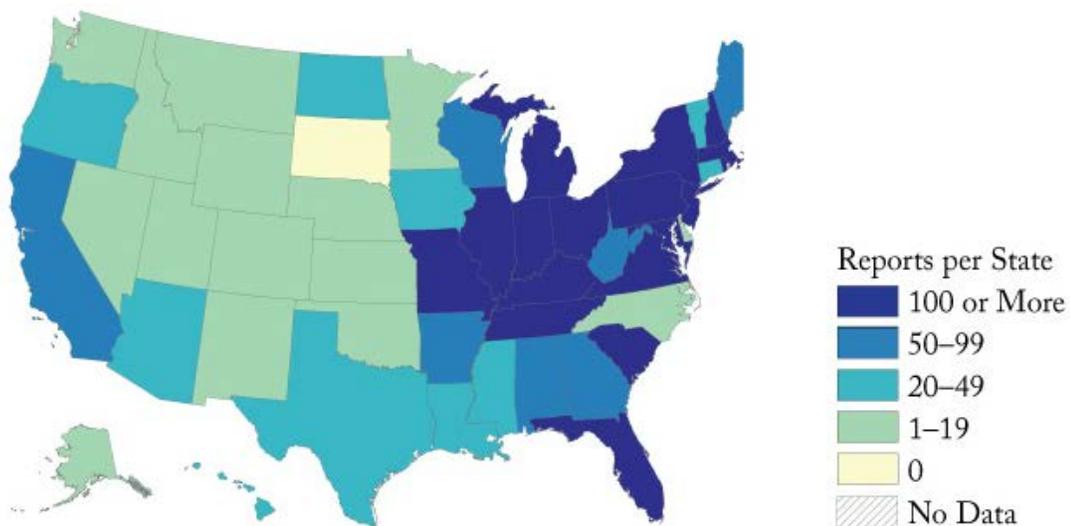


* Percentages for fentanyl and heroin are included in the opioid category and are broken out for clarity.

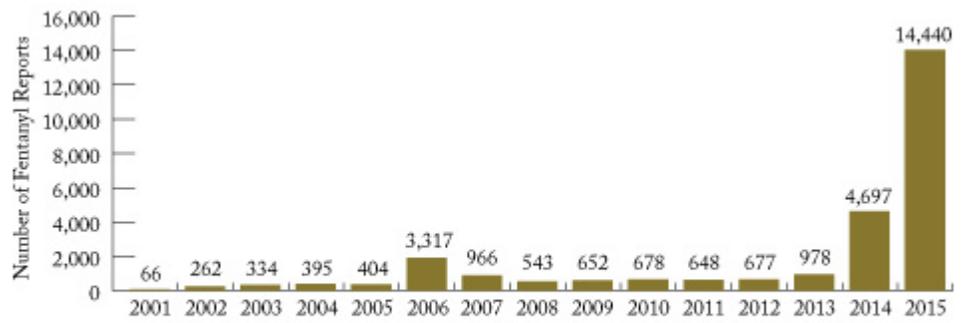
8. The National Forensic Laboratory Information System (NFLIS), a program of the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration Diversion Control Division, collects drug identification results and other information from federal, state and local forensic laboratories. In March 2017, NFLIS issued a brief on fentanyl; that report stated “Fentanyl-related overdose deaths increased from about 550 deaths in 2013 to more than 2,000 deaths in 2014 and 2015.” The report also stated “Although pharmaceutical fentanyl is diverted for abuse in the United States, the majority of fentanyl drug reports and fentanyl reported with other drugs results from clandestinely produced and trafficked fentanyl, not diverted fentanyl.” To see the March 2017 report, visit: <https://www.nflis.deadiversion.usdoj.gov/DesktopModules/ReportDownloads/Reports/NFLISFentanylBrief2017.pdf>

Included in the March 2017 NFLIS brief are two pieces showing fentanyl reports by state in 2001 and 2015, and a graph showing fentanyl reports from January 2001 to December 2015 (all provided below). The latter report shows fentanyl reports increasing dramatically in 2014 and 2015.

Fentanyl reports in NFLIS, by State, 2015



National annual estimates of fentanyl reports in NFLIS, January 2001–December 2015



Includes fentanyl reports submitted to laboratories from January 1, 2001, through December 31, 2015, and analyzed within three months of each calendar year reporting period.

9. **Assistance is available to help Tennessee residents with substance use disorders. The Tennessee REDLINE (1-800-889-9789) is a toll-free information and referral line coordinated by the Tennessee Association of Alcohol, Drug & Other Addiction Services (TAADAS) and funded by the Tennessee Department of Mental Health and Substance Abuse Services.**

TDH Commissioner John Dreyzehner, MD, MPH talks about the dangers associated with fentanyl at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SvJxFJ-fUXQ>.

- ⁱ National Institute on Drug Abuse. "Fentanyl." *NIDA*. N.p., 06 June 2016. Web. 17 Mar. 2017. <<https://www.drugabuse.gov/drugs-abuse/fentanyl>>.
- ⁱⁱ Volkow, Nora D., M.D. "Fentanyl Use in Combination With Street Drugs Leading to Death in Some Cases." *NIDA*. National Institutes of Health; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 01 June 2006. Web. 17 Mar. 2017. <<https://www.drugabuse.gov/about-nida/directors-page/messages-director/2006/06/fentanyl-use-in-combination-street-drugs-leading-to-death-in-some-cases>>.
- ⁱⁱⁱ National Institute on Drug Abuse. "Fentanyl." *NIDA*. N.p., 06 June 2016. Web. 17 Mar. 2017. <<https://www.drugabuse.gov/drugs-abuse/fentanyl>>.
- ^{iv} Bennington-Castro, Joseph. "Fentanyl - Side Effects, Dosage, Interactions | Everyday Health." *EverydayHealth.com*. Ed. Sanjai Sinha. Everyday Health Media, LLC, 09 Jan. 2015. Web. 17 Mar. 2017. <<http://www.everydayhealth.com/drugs/fentanyl>>.
- ^v National Institute on Drug Abuse. "Fentanyl." *NIDA*. National Institutes of Health; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 03 June 2016. Web. 17 Mar. 2017. <<https://www.drugabuse.gov/publications/drugfacts/fentanyl>>.
- ^{vi} "Fentanyl: Preventing Occupational Exposure to Emergency Responders." *Centers for Disease Control and Prevention*. National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health, 28 Nov. 2016. Web. 17 Mar. 2017. <<https://www.cdc.gov/niosh/topics/fentanyl/illegaluse.html>>.
- ^{vii} "Fentanyl: Preventing Occupational Exposure to Emergency Responders." *Centers for Disease Control and Prevention*. National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health, 28 Nov. 2016. Web. 17 Mar. 2017. <<https://www.cdc.gov/niosh/topics/fentanyl/illegaluse.html>>.
- ^{viii} Frank, Richard G., Ph.D., and Harold A. Pollack, Ph.D. "Addressing the Fentanyl Threat to Public Health — NEJM." *New England Journal of Medicine*. N.p., 16 Feb. 2017. Web. 17 Mar. 2017. <<http://www.nejm.org/doi/10.1056/NEJMp1615145>>.
- ^{ix} Drug Enforcement Administration. "2016 National Drug Treat Assessment Summary." *National Drug Threat Assessment (2016)*: 65-72. Drug Enforcement Administration. U.S. Justice Department, Nov. 2016. Web. 17 Mar. 2017. <<https://www.dea.gov/resource-center/2016%20NDTA%20Summary.pdf>>.
- ^x Drug Enforcement Administration. "2016 National Drug Treat Assessment Summary." *National Drug Threat Assessment (2016)*: 65-72. Drug Enforcement Administration. U.S. Justice Department, Nov. 2016. Web. 17 Mar. 2017. <<https://www.dea.gov/resource-center/2016%20NDTA%20Summary.pdf>>.
- ^{xi} Anson, Pat. "Illegal Fentanyl Major Cause of Rising Overdose Deaths." *Pain News Network*. N.p., 19 Dec. 2015. Web. 17 Mar. 2017. <<https://www.painnewsnetwork.org/stories/2015/12/19/illegal-fentanyl-likely-cause-of-rising-overdose-deaths>>.
- ^{xii} "Influx of Fentanyl-laced Counterfeit Pills and Toxic Fentanyl-related Compounds Further Increases Risk of Fentanyl-related Overdose and Fatalities." *Centers for Disease Control and Prevention*. N.p., 25 Aug. 2016. Web. 17 Mar. 2017. <<https://emergency.cdc.gov/han/han00395.asp>>.
- ^{xiii} "DEA Issues Nationwide Alert on Fentanyl as Threat to Health and Public Safety." *DEA.gov / Headquarters News Releases, 03/18/15*. U.S. Justice Department, 18 Mar. 2015. Web. 17 Mar. 2017. <<https://www.dea.gov/divisions/hq/2015/hq031815.shtml>>.