



# Health Alert Network

## Tri-County Health Department

Serving Adams, Arapahoe and Douglas Counties

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John M. Douglas, Jr., M.D. Executive Director

The pages that follow contain information critical to protecting the health of your patients and the citizens of Colorado.

## HAN ADVISORY

Number of pages including cover: 4

Subject: **Advisory - Possible Increased Risk of Fentanyl Overdose From Black Tar Heroin in Denver - November 12, 2019**

Message ID: 11/12/2019 4:30:00 PM

Recipients: HAN Community Members.

From: TRI-COUNTY HEALTH DEPARTMENT

Adams, Arapahoe and Douglas County, Colorado

Recipient Instructions: **For your information. No response required.**

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You have received this message based upon the information contained within our Health Alert Network Notification System. If you have a different or additional e-mail or fax address that you would like us to use, or if you have additional questions, call 720-200-1477.

### Categories of Health Alert Network Messages:

**Health Alert:** Conveys the highest level of importance; warrants immediate action or attention.

**Health Advisory:** Provides important information for a specific incident or situation; may not require immediate action.

**Health Update:** Provides updated information regarding an incident or situation; unlikely to require immediate action.

**Info Service/Public Health Brief:** Provides general information that is not necessarily considered to be of an emergent nature.

You may download a copy of this HAN from the TCHD website at

<http://www.tchd.org/259/Health-Alert-Network>



## HEALTH ALERT

### Possible Increased Risk of Fentanyl Overdose From Black Tar Heroin in Denver November 12, 2019

**\*\*Health care providers: Please distribute in your office\*\***

#### KEY POINTS:

- Denver Police Department recently analyzed a seized sample of what appeared to be “black tar heroin.” It contained no heroin but instead the synthetic opioid fentanyl.
- Fentanyl is sometimes added covertly to illicit drugs. People who use these substances are often unaware of the contamination.
- Fentanyl has much higher potency than heroin and may cause accidental overdose. Contamination of illicit or counterfeit opioid drugs can contribute to opioid overdose and death.
- Fentanyl overdose should be suspected in persons presenting with signs and symptoms of opioid overdose. Such overdose may require greater quantities of naloxone (Narcan) for reversal, and repeated doses for possible relapse.
- Providers should advise people who use illicit opioids or with opioid use disorders about possible local and current increased risk of fentanyl contamination. People using illicit drugs should be:
  - Advised to seek treatment for use disorder if willing.
  - Advised not to use drugs alone.
  - Advised to use slower absorption methods (snorting, ingestion) over injection.
  - Advised to use a small amount of a substance first to test potency.
  - Prescribed naloxone in case overdose reversal is needed.

## **BACKGROUND:**

Public health and safety authorities in Denver have collaborated to track indicators that suggest potential increased levels of fentanyl contamination of illicit drugs (including prescription drugs purchased on the street). The detection of fentanyl replacing heroin in what otherwise appeared to be “black tar heroin” is a new and dangerous local observation.

Such contamination has been associated with high rates of opioid overdose in other regions. People using contaminated drugs may not recognize their increased risk for overdose. Health care providers can take certain actions to reduce the risk of overdose, and to treat overdose more effectively.

Fentanyl is a powerful synthetic opioid, more potent than heroin and morphine. Overdoses happen faster and are harder to stop. Fentanyl comes in pills, pure powder, and powder mixed with other drugs. Fentanyl cannot be seen, tasted, or smelled when mixed into other drugs.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS/GUIDANCE FOR PATIENTS**

1. Patients known or suspected of opioid drug misuse or opioid use disorder should be advised of these **recent local** observations and take action to reduce their risk. Such actions include:
  - a. Enrolling in opioid use disorder treatment programs, or otherwise avoiding opioid use.
  - b. Don't use drugs alone. Ensure someone is present who could respond to a possible emergency by dialing 911 (Bystanders who call 911 and aid victims are not subject to prosecution.)
  - c. Avoid mixing drugs. Don't mix opioids with alcohol or benzodiazepines
  - d. Test a small amount before using to note unusual effects.
  - e. Using slower absorption methods like snorting or swallowing rather than injection. If injecting, inject slower.
  - f. Avoid using black tar heroin or being particularly cautious about its use.
2. Providers should prescribe naloxone for emergency use to people using drugs or people (such as friends or family) who may observe drug use and overdose. Prescribing and lay carrying of naloxone is legal for this purpose.
3. Patients suspected of having opioid overdose who may have ingested fentanyl may require higher doses and additional treatments with naloxone, given fentanyl's potency. Those who receive naloxone in community settings should be monitored in emergency departments for possible overdose relapse.

## Testing

When opioid overdose is suspected, exposure to fentanyl can be assessed using urine or serum toxicology testing. However, fentanyl testing is not part of routine substance use screens and should be ordered specifically.

If fentanyl contamination is suspected in a patient with drug overdose, contact local law enforcement or poison control with information about the type of drug used and when/where procured if information can be obtained from the patient. Such information can be shared with governmental authorities without identifying the patient.

People using drugs may be testing drugs using test strips for fentanyl. These strips are difficult to interpret and not routinely recommended, but it is reasonable to avoid drugs with positive results.

### For more information:

- Denver metro area Syringe Access Programs
  - TCHD Aurora Syringe Access Services  
303-363-3077  
1475 Lima St, Aurora, 80010  
Monday –Thursday 1pm to 4pm
  - Harm Reduction Action Center  
303-572-7800  
231 E. Colfax Denver, CO 80203  
Monday-Friday 9am-12pm
  - Access Point Denver  
303-837-0166  
6260 E. Colfax Ave Denver, CO 80220
  - Lifepoint Denver  
720-385-6898  
Mobile Syringe Services- call for information
  
- Fentanyl report from Denver Public Health: [http://bit.ly/fentanyl\\_in\\_denver](http://bit.ly/fentanyl_in_denver)