



OPIOID FACT SHEET

WHAT IS AN OPIOID?

- Opioids are a class of drugs that includes the illegal drug heroin as well as power pain relievers available by prescription, such as oxycodone (Oxycontin), hydrocodone (Vicodin), codeine, morphine, fentanyl, methadone, and many others.
- Opioids bind to mu-opioid receptors on the nerve cells in the brain and body to reduce pain and suppress coughs when used legitimately, but can also cause intense euphoria or intense high that can lead to dependence and/or addiction, whether the drug ingested is heroin or a legally prescribed drug.
- The effects of opioids, particularly their rewarding, euphoric effects, are accentuated most when the drugs are delivered rapidly into the brain, thereby causing users “chasing the high” to snort or inject crushed prescription pills or heroin.
- Opioid overdose effects include severe depression of the respiratory system, potentially causing respiratory arrest, coma, and death. Opioid dependence and withdrawal is characterized by constricted nausea, mental confusion, drowsiness, severe sweats and constipation.
- Fentanyl, an opioid that is practically and effectively 50 and 100 times more potent than heroin or prescription opioids, is often used to adulterate heroin, cocaine, methamphetamine and other “street drugs.” Overdose deaths often result from a user’s unwitting purchase and use of fentanyl when believing he or she is purchasing heroin or prescription pills. Fentanyl derivatives such as carfentanil, which is used to anesthetize elephants, is also being used to adulterate heroin, causing cluster overdose deaths.
- Discussion of opioid prevention, treatment, enforcement, and deterrence in your community should address illicit drugs and prescription drugs, as opioids in all forms are present across the nation.

THE COLD, HARD TRUTH:

- On an average day:
 - At least 78 people will die from an opioid-related overdose, and according to public health reports from the field, the 2016 overdose death statistics will far outnumber the 78-deaths-per-day statistic of 2014.
 - 3,900 people will use a prescription opioid outside of legitimate medical purposes and supervision. These prescription drugs are many times obtained through theft, fraud, or otherwise diverted from people with legitimate, medically-appropriate prescriptions.
 - 580 people will try heroin for the first time.
- Heroin overdoses have increased 244% between 2007 and 2013. Many of the new heroin users are youths, with an average age of 24 ½ years old for first-time users.
- The change in heroin administration routes to pill form, coupled with the rise of counterfeit pills often containing heroin, fentanyl, and fentanyl derivatives, has caused unwitting users who purchase drugs on the street to overdose and die in record numbers.

THE FALLACY OF HEROIN:

- No longer restricted to the stereotypical “dirty needles” used in an alleyway, heroin has invaded rural towns and urban cities alike and does not discriminate among socio-economic lines, race, age, or gender.

- It can appear as a dark black gummy tar or a brown or white powder. Many times, the dark black or brown powder heroin carries a strong vinegar smell.
- Heroin in powder form can be injected, smoked, or inhaled. The drug is also made into counterfeit pills, tablets, and gel capsules, which can be swallowed or crushed and chewed.

FENTANYL

- Fentanyl is a synthetic opioid. Fentanyl is 80-100 times more powerful than morphine, the substance to which heroin metabolizes, and is commonly used as an end of life sedative or during operational anesthesia.
- Fentanyl has historically been marketed for end-stage cancer treatment and applied via patches on the skin. Illicit fentanyl now appears in powder form, and is often visually indistinguishable by law enforcement.
- Fentanyl appears in counterfeit tablets, pills, and gel capsules attempting to mimic certain prescription drugs.
- Fentanyl powder has the power to kill with the ingestion, inhalation, or skin absorption of just two milligrams. By comparison, a sweetener packet found on a restaurant tabletop generally contains 1,000 milligrams per packet.
- Drug abusers, law enforcement officers, first responders, or family members who are unaware of its presence or lethality can be inadvertently exposed to fentanyl.
- Drug traffickers are now combining fentanyl or fentanyl-related compounds with other drugs to increase their potency and profit. Many unsuspecting drug abusers who are abusing cocaine, methamphetamine, heroin, or other synthetic drugs have overdosed and died within days, hours, or minutes, of each other following the introduction into a community of fentanyl or heroin laced with fentanyl.

HOW DID THIS OPIOID PROBLEM GET TO MY COMMUNITY?

- Opioids, particularly diverted prescription drugs, often enter the community through the family medicine cabinet, theft and robbery of local pharmacies, and through fraudulent prescriptions.
- Heroin, fentanyl, and counterfeit prescription drugs are also sold by drug trafficking organizations and street gangs already operating in a community.
- Additionally, many opioids can be purchased via the Internet; social media sites such as Facebook, Google, and Craigslist, among others; as well as a myriad of sites on the Dark Web. They are then shipped discreetly via commercial parcel delivery carriers such as the U.S. Post Office, FedEx, DHL, or UPS.

WHAT IS BEING DONE TO CURB THIS EPIDEMIC?

- The government at all levels: career public servants, law enforcement, and public health officials, have partnered with educators, treatment professionals, and non-profit organizations, to bring awareness and develop strategies and solutions for your community.
- Strategies include targeted and proactive drug law enforcement activity to dismantle the trafficking organizations; prevention programs and drug awareness and education campaigns; and intervention and treatment options that address the short and long-term health of addicts and recovering addicts.
- Countless local, tribal, and regional efforts, tailored to the specific needs of a community, are underway and supported by national and international efforts which focus on various parts of this problem.

WHAT CAN YOU DO?

- Have a meaningful conversation with your family. Reject the notion that “it can’t happen to you or your family.” Talk aloud about the threat opioid abuse brings to your family. Commit to asking the tough questions.
- Invest in your family and community’s future. Many intensely affected regions routinely host public forums, town halls, prevention activities at schools, community vigils, walks, and fun runs. Get involved and participate.
- Speak up. Contact law enforcement when you suspect drug-related activity in your neighborhood. Successful policing relies on a whole-community approach to identify and bring drug trafficking organizations to justice.
- Keep any prescription drugs in your house secure and locked away, out of reach of others.
- Take advantage of national or local take back days sponsored by law enforcement or your local pharmacy to discard any unneeded drugs.

A FEW RESOURCES

- Get Smart About Drugs, a DEA Resource for Parents, Educators, & Caregivers: www.getsmartaboutdrugs.com
- Just Think Twice, Get the Facts About Drugs: www.justthinktwice.com
- Above The Influence: www.abovetheinfluence.com
- U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration: www.dea.gov
- Office of National Drug Control Policy: www.oncp.gov
- National Institute on Drug Abuse: www.drugabuse.gov