

HCS Media Backgrounder: Fentanyl Mixed with Stimulants

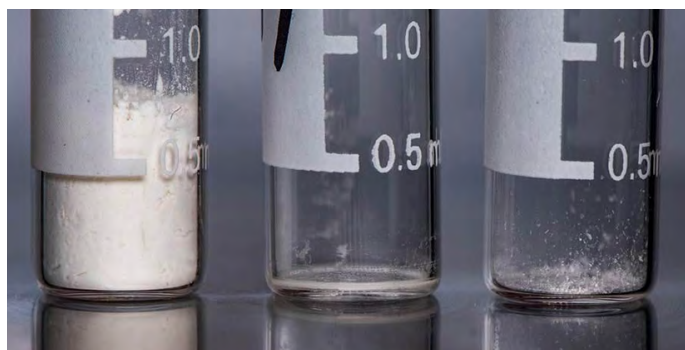
BACKGROUND: FENTANYL MIXED WITH STIMULANTS – FACTS AND STRATEGIES TO REDUCE OVERDOSES

It is well known that the powerful opioid fentanyl and related opioid synthetics have contributed to the rise in opioid overdose deaths in the United States. Fentanyl is 50 times more potent than heroin. It is often mixed with heroin and other drugs as a cheap additive—escalating potency and leading to overdoses. Many people are unaware they are taking drugs containing fentanyl.

It is not as well known that fentanyl and related synthetic opioids are often added to other drugs including pills that look like prescription opioids, as well as cocaine and methamphetamine. Overdose deaths involving prescription opioids and heroin have been the focus of public health efforts since the mid-2000s, with overdose deaths from cocaine and methamphetamine rising steeply since 2009 attributed to fentanyl additives.

FENTANYL + STIMULANT-RELATED DEATHS

In 2019, 23% of all drug overdose deaths involved psychostimulants (mostly methamphetamine) and 22% involved cocaine. Of those psychostimulant overdoses, 34% included a fentanyl mixture and of the cocaine-related deaths, 63% involved fentanyl. The surge in overdose deaths related to mixtures of fentanyl and stimulants in the past decade can be seen in this chart:



This image shows the equivalent lethal amounts of the synthetic opioids fentanyl (center) and carfentanyl (right) compared to the heroin vial on the left. [Courtesy DEA.](#)

TRACKING FENTANYL-RELATED DEATHS

[Research](#) suggests a clear rise in use of both stimulants and fentanyl in the era of COVID-19. An [analysis](#) of a half million urine drug tests from various clinical settings was done in the first few months following the declared national public emergency in March 2020. Findings revealed a 23% increase in samples testing positive for methamphetamine; a 19% increase for cocaine; and a 67% increase for fentanyl.

OVERDOSE DEATHS	2009	2019
Psychostimulants (mostly methamphetamine) mixed with fentanyl related drugs	176	10,139
Cocaine mixed with fentanyl related drugs	69	564

CDC WONDER Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, National Center for Health Statistics. [Accessed from NIDA website.](#)

It can be difficult for public health officials to know the exact number of deaths caused by fentanyl added to cocaine and methamphetamine. Death certificates do not always list all drugs involved in each overdose death, and when they do, they may not accurately list which drugs principally contributed to mortality.

A 2019 [study](#) using New York City death certificate data linked to medical examiner toxicology information suggested that fentanyl accounted for most of the increase in cocaine-involved deaths. Therefore, it is increasingly important to inform the public that people who use illicit stimulants—like cocaine and methamphetamine—may be at an increased risk for overdose deaths due to fentanyl.

EDUCATIONAL OUTREACH NEEDED ON STIMULANT USE, NALOXONE, AND RELATED ISSUES

Multiple doses of naloxone may be needed to reverse an overdose due to fentanyl. Because fentanyl is increasingly present in cocaine and methamphetamine, it is advisable to make multiple doses of naloxone available to people using these drugs.

Public health experts are offering [recommendations](#) to address these issues:

1. Overdose prevention outreach should include people who use cocaine or methamphetamine, in addition to people who use heroin and purchase pills resembling prescription opioids on the street. This includes access to and education about the overdose reversal drug naloxone.
2. Even people who use cocaine or methamphetamine intermittently should be targeted in opioid overdose prevention initiatives.
3. Healthcare providers should talk to patients using cocaine, methamphetamine, and all illicit drugs about potential exposure to fentanyl.
4. Public health officials should track and monitor patterns of drug use via [surveillance systems](#) and make this information available to providers so they can stay aware of geographic trends relevant to the people they treat.
5. All people who use illicit substances and/or illicitly obtained or counterfeit prescription opioids should be counseled to (1) carry naloxone and read materials/get training on how to use it; (2) learn how to use multiple doses because of fentanyl potency; and (3) avoid using drugs by themselves.
6. People with a history of any drug use who are leaving treatment or criminal justice settings should be counseled about the rapid increase of fentanyl additives in illicit drugs and, if possible, about the presence of fentanyl specifically in their community.
7. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recommends that medical examiners screen specimens to record the accurate cause of overdose deaths, even if the deceased is not known to have used opioids.
8. Repeated educational outreach is needed to discourage combining cocaine and methamphetamine with other drugs, including opioids and alcohol.

RESOURCES

CDC Health Advisory. [Increase in Fatal Drug Overdoses Across the United States Driven by Synthetic Opioids Before and During the COVID-19 Pandemic](#). CDC Health Alert Network, CDCHAN-00438. Published December 17, 2020.

CDC. [CDC Opioid Overdose: Other Drugs](#). Accessed April 7, 2021.

Blog authored by NIDA Director Nora Volkow. [Rising Stimulant Deaths Show that We Face More than Just an Opioid Crisis](#). *National Institute on Drug Abuse website*. Published November 12, 2020. Accessed June 11, 2021.

Nolan ML, Shamasunder S, Colon-Berezin C, Kunins HV, Paone D. [Increased Presence of Fentanyl in Cocaine-Involved Fatal Overdoses: Implications for Prevention](#). *J Urban Health*. 2019;96(1):49–54. doi: 10.1007/s11524-018-00343-z

CDC. [Synthetic Opioid Overdose Data](#), viewed March 2021. Includes state data.

CDC WONDER NCHS. [Overdose Death Rates](#) (scroll down to “Links: Overdose Data 1999–2019”).

Hedegaard H, Miniño AM, Warner M. [Co-involvement of opioids in drug overdose deaths involving cocaine and psychostimulants](#). *NCHS Data Brief*. 2021;406. <http://dx.doi.org/10.15620/cdc:103966>

Wainwright JJ, Mikre M, Whitley P, et al. [Analysis of Drug Test Results Before and After the US Declaration of a National Emergency Concerning the COVID-19 Outbreak](#). *JAMA Research Letter*. 2020;324(16):1674–1677. Published September 18, 2020. doi:10.1001/jama.2020.17694

Media contact for questions about materials from the National Institute on Drug Abuse:

<https://www.drugabuse.gov/news-events/contact-press-office>

Media contact for the Healing Communities site: