Montana Health Alert Network

DPHHS HAN ADVISORY

Cover Sheet

DATE
May 28, 2021

SUBJECT
Increased Fentanyl-related Overdose and Fatalities in Montana

INSTRUCTIONS

DISTRIBUTE to your local HAN contacts. This HAN is intended for general sharing of information.

- Time for Forwarding: As Soon As Possible
- Please forward to DPHHS at hhshan@mt.gov
- Remove this cover sheet before redistributing and replace it with your own

For technical issues related to the HAN message contact the Emergency Preparedness Section at 1-406-444-0919

DPHHS Health Alert Hotline:
1-800-701-5769

DPHHS HAN Website:
www.han.mt.gov

Please ensure that DPHHS is included on your HAN distribution list: hhshan@mt.gov

Categories of Health Alert 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.
- **Information Service**: passes along low level priority messages that do not fit other HAN categories and are for informational purposes only.

Please update your HAN contact information on the Montana Public Health Directory.
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BACKGROUND
Fentanyl, a synthetic and short-acting opioid analgesic, is 50-100 times more potent than morphine and approved for managing acute or chronic pain associated with advanced cancer.\textsuperscript{1} Although pharmaceutical fentanyl can be diverted for misuse, most cases of fentanyl-related morbidity and mortality have been linked to illicitly manufactured fentanyl and fentanyl analogs, collectively referred to as non-pharmaceutical fentanyl (NPF).\textsuperscript{2} NPF is sold via illicit drug markets for its heroin-like effect and often mixed with heroin and/or cocaine as a combination product—with or without the user’s knowledge—to increase its euphoric effects. While NPF-related overdoses can be reversed with naloxone, a higher dose or multiple number of doses per overdose event may be required to revive a patient due to the high potency of NPF.\textsuperscript{3,4}

INFORMATION
The Montana State Crime Lab Forensic Science Division (FSD) reports a recent increase in overdose deaths and DUIs associated with fentanyl. Between April 1-30, 2021, 11 cases were submitted to the FSD, the same number of cases seen between January 1 and March 31, 2021. Data for May is forthcoming.

Department of Health and Human Services data shows an increased number of calls related to overdose on the Rocky Boy’s Reservation; in May, there were 17 overdose-related calls compared to two in March, and six in April.

\begin{itemize}
  \item 70\% of the overdose calls in May occurred in the one-week period between May 19th to 26th
  \item Individuals who overdosed in May needed, on average, higher doses of naloxone than those who overdosed in March or April. (9mg vs. 4.5mg and 8mg, respectively)
  \item A few cases in May required very high doses of naloxone, up to 20mg
\end{itemize}

Department of Health and Human Services data shows an increased number of overdoses in Missoula; May had the same number of overdose-related calls as March and April combined.

\begin{itemize}
  \item Half of the overdose calls in May occurred in the one-week period between May 19th to 26th
  \item A few cases in May required high doses of naloxone, up to 12mg
\end{itemize}

This leads public health officials to believe that fentanyl may be being sold as a substitute for heroin meant for injection drug use, or in the form of counterfeit pills. The Montana Department of Justice reports pills containing fentanyl have been found in the state.
RECOMMENDATIONS

Local Health Departments
Raise awareness among key partners and stakeholders, including harm-reduction workers to an increased risk for fentanyl overdose and to the potential need for higher doses of naloxone to reverse the overdose.

Develop public health messaging about fentanyl, including fentanyl-laced counterfeit pills and fentanyl-related compounds that emphasizes the toxicity and potential lethality of the drug versus its high “potency.” The messaging should include warnings of the highly variable content of fentanyl present in illicit products, which further elevates risk of overdose and the potential need for higher doses of naloxone to reverse the overdose [6,7].

EMS & Law Enforcement
Be aware of the potential for increased incidence of overdose in your community and for the potential need for additional stocks of naloxone.

Prioritize and expedite laboratory testing of drug samples taken from drug overdose scenes, if possible.

Be aware that individuals who have overdosed on fentanyl and have received bystander naloxone may be at continued risk for relapse once the naloxone effect has ended.

Medical Examiners & Coroners
Screen for fentanyl in suspected opioid overdose cases in regions reporting increases in fentanyl seizures, fentanyl-related overdose fatalities, or unusually high spikes in heroin or unspecified drug overdose fatalities.

All suspected overdose cases should be referred to a medical examiner to determine if an autopsy is warranted

Expanding Naloxone Access
Multiple dosages of naloxone may need to be administered per overdose event because of fentanyl and fentanyl analog’s increased potency relative to other opioids. Orally-ingested counterfeit pills laced with fentanyl or fentanyl analogs may require prolonged dosing of naloxone in the ED hospital setting due to a delayed toxicity that has been reported in some cases.

The State of Montana has issued a standing order for Naloxone that allows Montanans to access Naloxone at no cost.

Organizations and facilities may create a Memorandum of Understanding with the State of Montana that will allow them to:

- Order Naloxone directly from the contracted pharmacy without restrictions.
- Distribute Naloxone into the hands of those who are at risk of experiencing opioid-related drug overdose and to a family member, friend, or other person who can assist a person who is at risk of experiencing an opioid-related drug overdose.
- Keep Naloxone on hand for staff to administer as needed.

To learn more about accessing free naloxone, contact Ki-Ai McBride, Opioid Prevention Program Manager at Ki-Ai.McBride@mt.gov

REFERENCES


