



Governor Mike Dunleavy STATE OF ALASKA

May 16, 2022

Dear Community, Health and Education Partners,

As you have heard in the news and witnessed in your communities, Alaska is experiencing a sharp and tragic surge in drug overdose deaths. Between 2020 and 2021, we have seen a 71 percent increase in overdose deaths in Alaska based on preliminary 2021 data.

The synthetic opioid, fentanyl, is driving this increase. Fentanyl is now involved in 75 percent of opioid overdose deaths. Fentanyl is 50 times stronger than heroin and 100 times stronger than morphine. It is made legally and used pharmaceutically but has also become a prevalent substance in counterfeit pills and is frequently added to other substances such as heroin, methamphetamine and cocaine.

It takes a minimal amount of fentanyl to cause an overdose, and the amount of fentanyl that can kill can fit on the tip of a pencil. One pill can kill.

The purpose of this letter is to ask for your help alerting your local communities about the dangers of fentanyl. Attached please find a warning to Alaskans about fentanyl. The warning is also posted [here](#). Please share this critical information however you can with your patients, parents, members, shareholders and beneficiaries.

We also want all Alaskans to be aware of free [overdose rescue kits available through Project HOPE](#) at opioids.alaska.gov. These kits contain naloxone, a medication that can reverse an opioid overdose, plus fentanyl test strips to detect the presence of fentanyl in drugs. Please let Alaskans know about these life-saving resources.

Among working-age adults in Alaska aged 25 to 34, overdose deaths have increased nearly 200 percent from 2020 to 2021. For teens and young adults age 15 to 24, overdose deaths have increased by 25 percent.

Together, we can help save lives by making sure Alaskans are aware of the dangers of fentanyl, working with law enforcement to prevent drugs from coming into Alaska and reducing stigma so people can find resources to prevent overdose deaths, connect to treatment and begin healing. Overdose deaths are preventable if we take action together – Tribal and community leaders, health care providers and Alaska's businesses working with families, parents, schools, nonprofit agencies and more can make a difference.

Community, Health and Education Partners


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Please report any suspected illegal drug trafficking or other crime tips to the Alaska State Troopers by texting the keyword **AKTIPS**, followed by your crime tip to **847411**. Alternatively, information can be submitted securely online at <https://dps.alaska.gov/ast/tips> or through the AKtips app. The AKtips app is available for download for free via the Google Play Store, iTunes App Store, or at dps.alaska.gov/tips.

Thank you for helping to spread the word to help save lives.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Mike Dunleavy", with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Mike Dunleavy
Governor

Enclosures

Warning to Alaskans

Counterfeit pills containing fentanyl can cause an overdose death. Help keep Alaskans safe.

Governor Mike Dunleavy, with the Alaska Department of Health and Social Services (DHSS), is alerting Alaska residents, families and schools about the threat of overdose due to counterfeit pills containing fentanyl. According to the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA), nationally, 40% of all counterfeit pills in circulation contain fatal amounts of fentanyl. Alaska has seen a 71% increase in overdose deaths based on preliminary 2021 data, with 75% of all of the opioid overdose deaths involving fentanyl. A very small amount of fentanyl can cause someone to overdose and die. This bulletin contains guidance for Alaskans to help keep people safe.

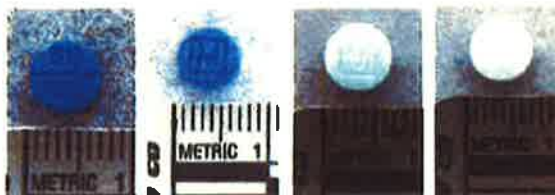
What is fentanyl?

Fentanyl is a synthetic opioid that is 50 times stronger than heroin and 100 times stronger than morphine. Although fentanyl is made and used pharmaceutically, it is also produced illegally in other countries and trafficked into the United States, usually as powder and pills. Fentanyl is frequently added into other substances such as heroin, methamphetamine and cocaine.

In Alaska, fentanyl is commonly seen in blue pills made to look like pharmaceutical oxycodone. People who sell or purchase drugs may call these pills "M-30s," "blues," or "dirty 30's". These fake pills are usually blue in color and stamped to look like real oxycodone pills you would get from a pharmacist. Because it takes a very small amount of fentanyl to cause an

overdose, one pill can be deadly. Fentanyl has also been found in other counterfeit pills such as benzodiazepines.

Pictured here are examples of counterfeit pills. Seizure of counterfeit pills containing fentanyl is on the rise.



Why do people use fentanyl and why is it a threat in Alaska?

Youth and young adults may use drugs for different reasons.

- People may use drugs to cope with emotional and physical pain and stress.
- People may use substances to obtain a feeling of euphoria or other desired moods.
- Youth and young adults may experiment with drugs with their friends or in social settings.

Fake pills are easy to get at school or via social media.

- There are accounts on social media designed to sell pills and other drugs.
- Snapchat is a popular tool for purchasing drugs because messages disappear.

What people may not know when they use illegal pills:

- It's hard to tell when pills are fake. People may think the pills came from a doctor or pharmacist.
- People may not know if pills contain fentanyl and other dangerous drugs.
- Many people don't know what fentanyl is or that that one pill can be deadly.
- Youth and young adults may also not know how to recognize and respond to an opioid overdose.

In 2021, Alaska experienced one fentanyl-related overdose death among youth aged 0-17 years and 15 fentanyl-related overdose deaths among young adults aged 18-24 years (preliminary data).¹

In a 2021 national survey, 59% of youth aged 13-24 hadn't heard of fentanyl. Only 37% believed that fentanyl was "extremely dangerous."²

In 2019, 15.1% of traditional high school students in Alaska reported ever taking prescription pain medicine without a doctor's prescription or differently than how a doctor told them to use it.³

How can families and schools work together to reduce youth overdose risk?

Families need to be educated on the dangers of fentanyl, and that even one pill can be dangerous and even fatal. Schools can support families by sharing the following messages:

- Assume all pills offered to you are fake and contain fentanyl. You can't smell or taste fentanyl. You cannot tell if a pill is fake just by looking at it.
- Do not take any pill that you do not directly get from a doctor or pharmacist. Pills purchased online or from social media are not safe.
- Every pill is different – even if one pill seems safe, another pill from the same batch may contain fentanyl.
- The amount of fentanyl in one pill can vary widely. Splitting a pill may not be a safe option because all the fentanyl could be in one half of the pill.
- If you or someone around you takes an illegal pill, know how to recognize an opioid overdose. Never use illegal pills when you're alone.
- Provide easy access to naloxone, also known as Narcan®. Naloxone is a drug that reverses the effects of an opioid overdose. Naloxone can be administered as an injection or as a nasal spray.

During 2020–2021, EMS in Alaska responded to 58 suspected overdoses among people aged 0-19 years.⁴

Opioids include heroin, fentanyl, and prescription medications like oxycodone.

Know the signs of an opioid overdose:

- Unconsciousness, or inability to wake up
- Limp body
- Falling asleep, extreme drowsiness
- Slow, shallow, irregular or no breathing
- Pale, blue, cold and/or clammy skin
- Choking, snoring or gurgling sounds
- Slow or no heartbeat
- Call 911 if you think someone is overdosing.

What should schools do?

- Share this bulletin with parents and caregivers.
- Train school staff to know the signs of an opioid overdose (see above).
- Have naloxone available in case an overdose occurs on campus.
- Work with school and school district to create new drug education curriculums that include current information on fentanyl. Schools can facilitate this education through media campaigns and other primary prevention strategies.
- Engage with your local public health centers and public safety agencies to identify and implement strategies meaningful to your local jurisdiction.

What should parents do?

- Know the signs of an opioid overdose.
- Talk to family members about the dangers of pills and fentanyl. Encouraging open communication about risky behaviors and emphasizing the dangers of counterfeit pills and fentanyl could save someone's life. Let family members know it's okay to ask for mental health support.
- If you are worried a family member may be at risk of an overdose, have naloxone in your home and make sure everyone knows how to access it. Find information on naloxone and how to obtain it here.
- Get rid of unused or expired medications.



For questions, please email osmap@alaska.gov. For more information visit opioids.alaska.gov.

For school health information, please contact the Office of School Health and Safety at schoolhealthandsafety@alaska.gov.

Credit to The Oregon-Idaho High Intensity Drug Trafficking Area (HIDTA)

1 Alaska Division of Public Health, Health Analytics and Vital Records Section. Accessed 4/15/2022.

2 <https://www.songforcharlie.org/data>

3 2019 Alaska Youth Risk Behavior Survey

4 Alaska's Biospatial Overdose Dashboard. Accessed 5/2/2022

May 2022



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**1 gram or 500
potential lethal
doses of fentanyl**





U.S. penny compared to a potentially lethal dose of fentanyl.





A potentially lethal dose of fentanyl on the tip of a pencil.

