

# Fentanyl

## What is Fentanyl?

Fentanyl is a powerful synthetic opioid that is up to 100 times more potent than morphine and 50 times more potent than heroin. It is both a prescribed drug, as well as a drug that is at times made and used illegally.

Like morphine, prescription fentanyl is typically used to treat patients with severe pain, especially after surgery. It is also sometimes used to treat patients with chronic pain who are physically tolerant to other opioids. When prescribed by a doctor, fentanyl can be given as a shot, a patch that is put on a person's skin, or as lozenges that are sucked like cough drops.

Fentanyl that is illegally manufactured is dangerous. It is made without the quality controls of pharmaceutical grade fentanyl and is a major contributor to recent increases in synthetic opioid overdose deaths. This illegally manufactured fentanyl is sold illegally as a powder, dropped onto blotter paper, put in eye droppers and nasal sprays, or made into counterfeit pills that look like other prescription opioids.

Importantly, fentanyl is also being mixed with other drugs, such as heroin, cocaine, methamphetamine, and MDMA. This is especially risky when people taking drugs don't realize that the drugs they are using might contain fentanyl and significantly increase their risk for overdose death.

Synthetic opioids, including fentanyl, are now the most common drugs involved in drug overdose deaths in the United States. In 2017, 59 percent of opioid-related deaths involved fentanyl, compared to 14.3 percent in 2010.

## Risk of Overdose

A person can easily overdose on fentanyl. An overdose occurs when a drug produces serious adverse effects and life-threatening symptoms. Death from an opioid overdose happens



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when the drug depresses the parts of the brain that control breathing. Signs and symptoms when people overdose on opioids include:

- Their face becomes extremely pale and/or feels clammy to the touch
- Their body goes limp
- Their fingernails or lips have a purple or blue color
- They start vomiting or making gurgling noises
- They cannot be awakened or are unable to speak
- Their breathing or heartbeat slows or stops

## Risk of Addiction

Fentanyl is addictive because of its potency. A person taking prescription fentanyl as instructed by a doctor can still experience dependence, which is characterized by withdrawal symptoms when the drug is stopped. A person can be dependent on a substance without being addicted, but dependence can sometimes lead to addiction.

People addicted to fentanyl who stop using it can have severe withdrawal symptoms that begin as early as a few hours after the drug was last taken. These symptoms can be extremely uncomfortable and are the reason many people find it so difficult to stop taking fentanyl.

These symptoms include:

- Muscle and bone pain
- Sleep problems
- Diarrhea and vomiting
- Cold flashes with goose bumps
- Uncontrollable leg movements
- Severe cravings



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## SOURCES

National Institute on Drug Abuse: <https://www.drugabuse.gov/publications/drugfacts>

Substance Abuse and Mental Health Service Administration: <https://www.samhsa.gov/medication-assisted-treatment/treatment/opioid-overdose>

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