



COMMUNITY WELLBEING ADVISORY

To: Sioux Lookout area Chiefs and Health Directors
From: Dr. Lloyd Douglas, Public Health Physician
Date: 10 July 2024
Re: **Opioid Overdose Caused by Fentanyl**

Issue:

We received reports indicating the presence of fentanyl in the Sioux Lookout area First Nations communities. Fentanyl is a common cause of overdoses-related deaths in Canada. First Nations communities are disproportionately affected by opioids due to the historical and ongoing colonial policies and practices. A report prepared by the Chiefs of Ontario (COO) and Ontario Drug Policy Research Network (ODPRN) indicates that in 2021, the rate of opioid-related deaths among First Nations people was more than 7 times higher than the non-Indigenous population of Ontario. The same study found that nearly 90% of opioid-related deaths involved fentanyl. This Community Wellbeing Advisory provides the latest information about fentanyl and offers recommendations to reduce the risk of opioid overdose in the Sioux Lookout area First Nations communities.

What is Fentanyl?

Fentanyl is a synthetic opioid that is up to 50 times stronger than heroin and 100 times stronger than morphine. Due to its potency, fentanyl is often added to other unregulated drugs to increase their strength, making them cheaper, more powerful, more addictive, and more dangerous. Drug dealers who make fake pills may not know or control how much fentanyl is included in each pill. Additionally, drugs can become accidentally contaminated with fentanyl when drug dealers re-use surfaces and equipment that have previously been used for fentanyl. Fentanyl is odourless and tasteless. You may not even know you are taking it. Even a few grains of fentanyl can be enough to kill.

Effects of Fentanyl

Fentanyl can cause dizziness, confusion, “nodding off” (being in and out of consciousness), drowsiness, slow breathing, nausea and vomiting, smaller pupils, itching or a warm sensation on the skin. Life-threatening effects can occur within 2 minutes of use.

Signs of Overdose

Opioid drugs affect the part of your brain that controls your breathing. When you take more opioids than your body can handle (overdose), your breathing slows. This can lead to unconsciousness and even death. The signs of a fentanyl overdose are the same as those for other opioids and include:

- Unresponsiveness

- Slow, shallow breathing, or complete cessation of breathing (respiratory arrest)
- Gurgling sounds or snoring
- Cold, clammy, or bluish skin, especially in the lips and nails
- Severe sleepiness or loss of consciousness

Who is at most risk of an opioid overdose?

Anyone using prescribed or street opioids can have an overdose. You increase the risk of overdose if you:

- take prescription opioids more often or at higher doses than recommended
- take opioids with alcohol or sedatives, such as: sleeping pills, muscle relaxants, benzodiazepines
- inject drugs
- take an opioid your body isn't used to, or switching to a stronger drug
- take higher doses than you are used to
- use drugs of unknown purity or strength
- have other health conditions, like liver or kidney disease, or breathing problems
- have stopped taking opioids for a while and start taking them again

Recommendations:

- If drug testing strips are available in your nursing stations, make sure your drug supply doesn't contain fentanyl. You can seek assistance from the harm reduction service providers and/or nursing stations in your communities.
- If you do use opioids or drugs that may be contaminated with fentanyl:
 - do not use alone
 - avoid injecting as it significantly increases the risk of getting overdosed.
 - use a small amount of the opioid first to check the strength
 - don't take your opioid with alcohol or other drugs
 - Have naloxone with you and know how to use it

If possible, use safer supply services. Check with your nursing station if they have a Needle Distribution Service where clean drug use supplies can be provided free of charge.

- If you think someone is overdosing on fentanyl or any other opioid:
 - call the nursing station immediately
 - use naloxone, a drug that can temporarily reverse the effects of an opioid overdose
 - naloxone wears off in 20 to 90 minutes, so it is important to seek further medical attention
 - give the person another dose of naloxone if signs and symptoms do not disappear or if they reappear
 - stay until emergency services arrive

- Use free and confidential harm reduction services provided in your communities to reduce the health and social harms associated with substance use
- Remember, you can use any drug safely with the right resources. Seek free and confidential professional help and resources for drug and alcohol addiction in Canada through the phone number: 1-877-254-3348 or Phone or Text: Toll-Free 1-844-NAN-HOPE (1-844-626-4673)

SLFNHA is closely monitoring the situation to protect the health of the community members we serve. We thank all community workers, healthcare providers, and community members for their support in improving the health of our people in the Sioux Lookout area First Nations communities.

If you have any questions, please contact:

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