

Fentanyl Exposure, Protection, and Treatment Myths and Facts

Information from Health Canada's Public Service Occupational Health Program (Adapted from USA Dept. of Homeland Security 2017)

EXPOSURE

- MYTH:** Touching even a small amount of fentanyl can cause opioid overdose, coma, or death.
- **FACT:** Incidental skin exposure to fentanyl is extremely unlikely to immediately harm you.
- Fentanyl and other potent synthetic opioids may appear as a powder, tablet, capsule, or in solution
 - Inhaling or transferring fentanyl from skin to mucous membranes (eyes, nose or mouth) are the most common types of incidental exposure
 - **DO:** wash the affected area with **soap and water** as soon as possible to easily remove fentanyl residue
 - **DON'T** use alcohol-based hand sanitizers, wipes or products. They may increase absorption of fentanyl
- MYTH:** First responders have overdosed after contact with a fentanyl overdose victim or contaminated environment.
- **FACT:** Most first responders' encounters with overdose victims and contaminated environments do not present a significant drug exposure threat to responders.
- Experts agree that routine encounters to fentanyl does not present a significant risk of drug exposure
 - **DO:** ensure that all commonly used controls and protocols are followed
 - Wear appropriate personal protective equipment (PPE), especially in unusual situations such as: High concentrations of airborne fentanyl powder, environmental contamination, etc.
 - There is no documented evidence of responders becoming ill after skin contact with fentanyl

PROTECTION

- MYTH:** PPE cannot protect you from fentanyl exposure.
- **FACT:** Worn correctly, Personal Protective Equipment will protect you.
- **DO:** wear PPE identified for the task when exposure to drug powders is likely
 - PPE includes gloves, properly fitted respiratory protection, and safety eyewear
 - See CSA reference below for additional information regarding PPE selection
 - **DON'T** use powdered gloves; powder particulates from the gloves may absorb and spread contaminants to unintended surfaces
- MYTH:** Standard precautions for dealing with suspicious substances do not apply to fentanyl.
- **FACT:** Occupational Health and Safety precautions on contact with unknown powdered substances are appropriate for most incidental encounters with fentanyl.
- **DO:** avoid direct contact with fentanyl if possible
 - Wear appropriate PPE identified as required for the specific task or activity
 - Wash your hands with **soap and water** often and after handling suspicious substances
 - Soap and water is a useful control to reduce powder contamination
 - Use proper decontamination and notification procedures for contaminated equipment or clothing
 - **DON'T** eat, drink or smoke after handling a suspicious substance until you have washed your hands

TREATMENT

- MYTH:** Naloxone can't save you from a fentanyl overdose.
- **FACT:** Naloxone (e.g. NARCAN Nasal Spray) is safe and counteracts the effects of an opioid overdose including fentanyl and other synthetic opioids.
- **DON'T** delay. Administer naloxone (following departmental policy and protocols), if you suspect an overdose
 - **DO:** In the event of a suspected opioid overdose, call immediately for emergency medical assistance. Naloxone is not a definitive medical treatment
 - The effects of naloxone are time limited; administer additional dose of naloxone if necessary, or if signs and symptoms reappear
 - **If naloxone is not available, provide rescue breathing or life-saving efforts until emergency services arrive**
- MYTH:** Feeling sick after encountering a powdered substance is a symptom of a fentanyl overdose.
- **FACT:** Fentanyl overdose signs/symptoms are the same as for all opioid overdoses: slowed/shallow breathing, decreasing consciousness, pinpoint pupils.
- **DO:** administer naloxone if you suspect an overdose
 - **DON'T** confuse a fentanyl overdose with the signs and symptoms of other conditions
 - Dizziness, rapid heart rate, nausea and vomiting, or "feeling ill" are more specific to heat injuries, dehydration, and adrenaline responses
 - **When in doubt, administer naloxone and call for emergency medical assistance**

References:

- Consult your Departmental Occupational Health & Safety policies and relevant regulations and protective guidelines.
- Canadian Standards Association (CSA) Standard Z 94.4 – 11 Selection, Use and Care of Respirators.
- Canadian Authorized use of naloxone Nasal Spray (NARCAN) <http://healthy Canadians.gc.ca/recall-alert-rappel-avis/hc-sc/2017/63784a-eng.php>
- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention: NIOSH-Fentanyl: Preventing Occupational Exposure to Emergency Responders. <https://www.cdc.gov/niosh/topics/fentanyl/risk.html>
- *InterAgency Board Recommendations on Selection and Use of Personal Protective Equipment and Decontamination Products for First Responders Against Exposure Hazards to Synthetic Opioids, Including Fentanyl and Fentanyl Analogues* (August 2017) <http://bit.ly/2xd92PT>.