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Carfentanil in Illicit Drug Supply

In July of 2024, the New York City Department of Health reported that carfentanil, a potent synthetic opioid drug, had been identified in multiple recent samples of street drugs sold as opioids. According to data from the NYC Health Department's Bureau of Vital Statistics and NYC Office of the Chief Medical Examiner, carfentanil was also involved in at least seven unintentional drug overdose deaths between January and June of 2024 in NYC.

Carfentanil has since been discovered in overdose autopsies throughout the United States and is suspected of being present in the U.S. heroin supply. According to the CDC, there were 238 carfentanil deaths nationwide between January and June of 2024. If carfentanil continues to spread, it could result in the deadliest drug crisis America has ever experienced.

Carfentanil Use

Carfentanil is an analogue of fentanyl and is one of the most potent opioid drugs available. It is manufactured for, and used in, veterinary medicine as an

anesthetic for large animals such as rhinoceroses, elephants, elks, and moose. Federal law restricts this drug to use by licensed veterinarians only. The licensed veterinarian also has to be a veterinarian engaged in zoo and exotic animal practice, wildlife management programs, or research. Carfentanil is not approved for use in domestic animals.

Potency, Symptoms, Side-Effects

Carfentanil is 10,000 times as potent as morphine and 100 times more powerful than fentanyl. It is intended for large animal use only. The drug's extreme potency makes it inappropriate for human use.

Carfentanil acts primarily on opioid receptors as an agonist. It induces similar effects of analgesia as other opioids, however, due to its potency, it will also induce strong effects such as complete and total sedation. Consequently, that is one of many reasons it is used only as a tranquilizer for large animals.

Carfentanil interacts predominantly with the opioid receptors distributed in the brain, spinal cord, and other tissues. It exerts its principal pharmacologic effects on the central nervous system.

Carfentanil also depresses the respiratory center, depresses the cough reflex, and constricts the pupils. Symptoms include respiratory depression or arrest, drowsiness, disorientation, sedation, pinpoint pupils, and clammy skin. The onset of these symptoms usually occurs within minutes of exposure.

Because of its acute toxicity in humans, carfentanil has been designated as an illegal (Schedule II) controlled substance. The drug is so dangerous, any expired or waste carfentanil must be disposed of taking into consideration applicable DEA, EPA, and FDA regulations. It is not appropriate to dispose of the drug by flushing it down the toilet or discarding it in the trash. Alternatively, the drug must be returned to the manufacturer for proper disposal, being careful to properly label and securely package the material. Any waste pharmaceutical must be labeled, securely packaged, and transported by a state licensed medical waste contractor to dispose of by burial in a licensed hazardous or toxic waste landfill or incinerator.

Dangers of Use/Exposure

Carfentanil is a serious danger to public safety, first responder, medical, treatment, and laboratory personnel. When emergency personnel encounter carfentanil, they are trained to exercise extreme caution.

Only properly trained and outfitted law enforcement professionals should handle any substance suspected to contain carfentanil. The onset of adverse symptoms usually occurs within minutes of exposure and the exposed person must seek IMMEDIATE medical attention. Recreational use of drugs containing carfentanil has been known to cause sudden deep coma, hypotension, and respiratory arrest. Reversing the respiratory depression induced by carfentanil involves immediate intra-venous administration of naloxone or naltrexone, which is often difficult or impossible.

Carfentanil is relatively easy to produce in illicit drug labs and very small amounts can produce thousands of doses. This makes the drug extremely profitable. It is also easy to mix carfentanil into drugs like cocaine, methamphetamine, and heroin which means that carfentanil poses a profound threat to both public safety and public health in America.

Carfentanil was responsible for a surge in overdose deaths leading up to 2018, but due to more strenuous regulation, there was a periodic decline in prevalence of the drug. But now, due to its production in illicit labs, the recent resurgence of carfentanil is even more dangerous, destructive, and deadly.



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Supervisor Newsletter

Prevent Drug Overdose Deaths at Work

There are many actions a supervisor or manager can take to help prevent a drug overdose death in the workplace. The first step is to learn the symptoms of an overdose and respond quickly.

Most overdoses occur as the result of the use of an opioid drug. If an employee exhibits the following symptoms:

- Extremely pale face and/or feels clammy to the touch.
- Limp body.
- Purple or blue-like color to the fingernails or lips.
- Vomiting or making gurgling noises.
- In a coma-like state (not able to be awakened or unable to speak).
- Either slow or no heartbeat or breathing.

Take the following actions:

- Dial 911 immediately as an overdose can result in death or severe brain injury.
- Dispense naloxone if trained on its administration.

- Do CPR if the employee is not breathing or breathing very slowly and continue CPR until emergency service personnel arrive.

Naloxone is a medication that is approved by the FDA to reverse an opioid overdose by blocking opioid receptor sites and reversing respiratory depression. This medication is available as an injectable, intranasal spray, and auto-injector. Naloxone is effective at reversing an overdose if the overdose is caused from opioids or opioids in combination with non-opioid drugs such as sedatives or stimulants. However, if an overdose is caused by non-opioid drugs including benzodiazepines or stimulants WITHOUT opioids, naloxone will not work.

Naloxone can be obtained by contacting a local pharmacy, doctor, healthcare provider, or substance abuse treatment facility. If your employer has approved supervisors' use of naloxone, it is important to know how to administer it, and to remember these tips:

- Read the directions thoroughly on how to administer naloxone as there are multiple delivery systems available.
- Be sure to check the expiration date and replace upon expiration.

- It is good to have multiple naloxone kits available as multiple doses may be required, especially with the trend of counterfeit pills containing the highly lethal synthetic opioid fentanyl.

In the event you administer naloxone, contact 911 immediately as multiple doses may be required, the employee may require additional medical attention including oxygen, the effects can wear off in about 30 minutes, and the employee can experience withdrawal symptoms and may become agitated.

Follow-up Care

If an employee suffers from an overdose at work, it will be important to adhere to the company substance abuse policy in getting the employee follow-up care. Addiction to opioids is similar to a chronic disease condition where treatment is required to reduce the risk of overdose and live a healthier life. Various factors can contribute to addiction thus it will be important for the employee to receive help to address the underlying cause(s). Evidence-based treatment including medication assisted treatment (MAT) exists to help with the withdrawal symptoms that are associated with stopping the use of opioids.

Resources

The SAMHSA Overdose Prevention and Response Toolkit is a good

resource for supervisors. The toolkit provides guidance on preventing and responding to an overdose. It also emphasizes that access to treatment is an essential aspect of overdose prevention.

The toolkit, designed to augment overdose prevention and reversal training, provides guidance on the role of opioid overdose reversal medications, including naloxone and nalmefene, and how to respond to an overdose. In addition to supervisors, it contains appendices for specific audiences, including people who use drugs (PWUD), people who take prescription opioids, first responders, healthcare practitioners, and others. The toolkit is in the public domain and can be downloaded at: <https://store.samhsa.gov/sites/default/files/overdose-prevention-response-kit-pep23-03-00-001.pdf>

SAMHSA also provides information for employees and others on how to prevent opioid overdose. Topics include:

- What is Opioid Overdose?
- How to Prevent Opioid Overdose.
- How to Recognize Opioid Overdose.
- How to Treat Opioid Overdose.

This publication can be viewed at: <https://www.samhsa.gov/medications-substance-use-disorders/medications-counseling-related-conditions/opioid-overdose>



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