

# THE BASICS



## Fentanyl (TNT, China girl, China white, drop dead, poison, flat line)

### What it is:

Fentanyl belongs to the opioid family of drugs, which also includes codeine, morphine and oxycodone. It is an important medication for patients with severe pain from a variety of conditions (e.g., cancer, surgery, end of life).

### Forms:

Prescription forms include: patches, fast-dissolving tablets, lozenges, and films.

Illegal powder forms are also produced and sold. The process of turning the drug into a powder creates other chemicals. The powder can be even more potent and dangerous than fentanyl in its original form.

### Do you know?

- Fentanyl is very potent - up to 100 times stronger than morphine and 20-50 times stronger than heroin.
- When prescribed by a doctor and used properly, it is a safe medication.
- High rates of opioid addiction are associated with over-prescribing, media attention about the drugs, and doctors prescribing the drugs to those with histories of trauma and substance abuse.
- Fentanyl is sometimes added to other illegal drugs without the user's knowledge.
- Naloxone (Narcan) is a safe medication that can reverse the effects of opioids such as fentanyl. It can be a lifesaving medication in cases of emergency overdose situations.
- Because illegal fentanyl use can cause death from overdose very quickly, naloxone is an important drug for first responders to have in such cases. In some places in Canada, drug users are supplied with naloxone so it is available in an emergency overdose situation.



### Is it legal?

It is illegal to use fentanyl without a prescription or in a way that was not directed by a physician.

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## Effects

### Short-term

When prescribed by a physician and used as intended, fentanyl can help relieve physical pain. A person abusing the drug may experience:



- Euphoria (feeling of pleasure, well-being, confidence, and power)
- Relaxation or drowsiness
- Trouble concentrating
- Small eye pupils
- Slight decrease in breathing rate
- Nausea, vomiting
- Constipation, loss of appetite, sweating
- Lower heart rate, blood pressure, and breathing
- Disorientation, convulsions, hallucinations, and death

### Long-term

After heavy use over a long period of time, a person may experience:

- Depression, difficulty concentrating and sleeping, and sexual problems
- Serious problems with constipation
- Irregular or disrupted menstrual cycles (females)
- Feeling small pains more severely when off the drug because it causes the body to stop producing its own natural pain killers over time
- Agitation, tremors, and seizures
- Lower heart rate, blood pressure, and breathing
- Disorientation, convulsions, hallucinations, and death

## Tolerance and Dependence

- Regular users of fentanyl can quickly develop a powerful psychological dependence (they feel they need it) and a physical dependence (the body needs it).
- Tolerance (the need for more of the drug to get the desired effect) can also occur.

## Withdrawal Symptoms

- Symptoms can range from mild to severe.
- Early symptoms can include agitation, anxiety, muscle aches, watery eyes, inability to sleep, runny nose, sweating, and yawning.
- More severe symptoms can include abdominal cramps, diarrhea, enlarged eye pupils, goose bumps, nausea and vomiting, and intense cravings for the drug.

## Other Risks

- **The risk of overdose and death with illegal fentanyl use is great. Fentanyl is a very potent drug. The smallest amount can be lethal.** The effects of fentanyl occur very quickly after use, meaning intoxication and overdose can occur before a person is aware something is wrong.



## REMEMBER

A person's experience with any drug can vary. Some things that may affect the experience: the amount and strength of the drug, the setting, a person's mood and expectations before taking the drug, gender, overall health, past experience with the drug, and whether more than one drug is being used at the same time. Using alcohol and other drugs, like benzodiazepines, at the same time can be dangerous.

- Signs of a potential overdose on fentanyl include:
  - very slow breathing (less than 12 breaths/minute)
  - pinpoint pupils
  - lowered level of consciousness (groggy, stumbling, slurring words)

**If these effects are present, seek immediate medical attention.**
- Keeping unused, prescribed opioids for future use or giving the drugs to others who are in pain is dangerous. They should only be used under careful supervision of a physician.
- Unless unused drugs are returned to a pharmacist, there is a risk of use by others.
- For those who inject, sharing needles can lead to infections such as HIV and hepatitis.
- Mixing opioids with alcohol causes drowsiness, reduced ability to function and increases the potential for overdose.
- Fentanyl use during pregnancy poses several risks:
  - Fetus dying before birth
  - Premature birth and a low birth weight
  - Infection with HIV/AIDS or hepatitis if the mother used infected needles to inject the drug
  - Baby may be born physically dependent on fentanyl and in withdrawal
- People can put themselves and others in risky situations when using these drugs such as driving while high, having unprotected sex or taking other unsafe actions that could harm themselves or others.
- Drug use can also lead to bad decision-making and embarrassing actions that you might regret.
- Substance use may increase the risk of mental health problems. People with mental health problems are at a higher risk of developing substance abuse problems.
- Drug use during one's youth (a time of important brain development) may affect physical, mental, and emotional development.

## We're Here For You

If alcohol, drugs or gambling are causing problems for you or someone you know, call us at **1-866-638-2561 (toll free)** for information about our programs and services.



\* Contact us if you would like the sources for this info sheet or more information on the subject.

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