

Fentanyl crisis is claiming children's lives

By Michael DiStefano and Susan Wheelan

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In El Paso County, 102 people lost their lives to fentanyl in 2021. This represents an increase of 2,500% from just five years ago when four people died from taking the drug. Fentanyl is a cheaper and stronger — and therefore potentially more fatal — drug than other opioids (like heroin or morphine), and we are now seeing more and more children accessing it with heartbreaking consequences.

A prescription drug that came on to the market in the 1950s, fentanyl began to cause an increase in overdoses starting five years ago. The drug is 50 times more potent than heroin and 100 times more potent than morphine.

Fentanyl overdoses are significantly increasing due to its abuse, illegal usage and even accidental usage due to its low cost. In our Colorado Springs hospital and throughout El Paso County, a growing number of kids — from infants to adolescents — have been rushed to emergency departments after ingesting fentanyl. Some teens and adolescents took it intentionally, but took too much.

Others took counterfeit pills that are designed to look like oxycodone.

And still others have unintentionally ingested fentanyl in cocaine, heroin, meth or marijuana.

One in four street drugs contain fentanyl right now, according to local law enforcement.

Our emergency departments also have seen toddlers who accessed fentanyl that was improperly stored at home. The consequences are tragic, because the tiniest dose of fentanyl can be fatal to an adult — and that threshold diminishes significantly with children.

When a person overdoses on fentanyl, they stop breathing.

No child or teen should be able to access an illegal substance, and fentanyl poses an additional danger with even more razor-thin margins for tragedy. As community members and parents, we all can do our part to protect children from this substance by taking these actions:

Keep all prescribed painkillers and other medications locked away and inaccessible to children and teenagers

Talk openly with your teenagers and older children about the dangers of unknown pills, imitation pills and street drugs laced with fentanyl and emphasize that no illicit drug is safe because any drug may contain this lethal opioid.

The imitation pills are often blue, referred to as “blueies,” “blues,” “blue skittles” and marked with M-30

Dispose of prescribed medications safely when you’re done, before kids have the chance to reach them

Carry naloxone (also known as Narcan), which is available without a prescription at Colorado pharmacies, on your person or at home in case someone overdoses and then call 911

Narcan is the only way to immediately reverse the effects of an overdose caused by fentanyl or another opioid

If you don't have Narcan and someone appears to have overdosed, call 911 immediately – emergency responders carry Narcan

If a young person you know misuses drugs, support them in seeking treatment as soon as possible

If you're a caregiver, start with your pediatrician to find therapy and discuss treatment options

Support public policies that bolster funding for pediatric mental health services and substance use treatment

Fentanyl is a powerful and potentially dangerous drug when abused or accidentally ingested. It has become increasingly accessible to children who should not be in possession of it, and its consequences can be irreversible.

This should not be acceptable to us as a community, and we call on everyone to do all that we can to take steps that prevent additional loss of life.

We need to come together and do everything in our power to protect our friends, family, neighbors and our children – the most vulnerable of our community and our future.

Access these resources for more information on fentanyl and opioids or drug take-back resources.

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