

Health Alert

Fentanyl Overdoses associated with Counterfeit Pharmaceutical Pills September 23, 2020

Drug overdoses remain a public health threat in Philadelphia, where 1,150 people died from unintentional overdoses in 2019. More than three-quarters of these deaths involved fentanyl, a potent synthetic opioid that is now commonly found in heroin, cocaine and other illicit drugs. Small amounts of fentanyl can unknowingly be present in these drugs and cause an overdose, even in someone who has developed tolerance to opioids.

The Philadelphia Department of Public Health is alerting providers to the presence of counterfeit controlled prescription pills that contain fentanyl. In September 2020, two female patients, ages 29 and 69 years, were seen in an emergency department in Philadelphia for overdoses associated with oxycodone look-alike pills they had purchased on the street. Both individuals responded to naloxone and, in each instance, urine drug screens were positive for fentanyl and oxycodone. Neither patient had a history of fentanyl use.

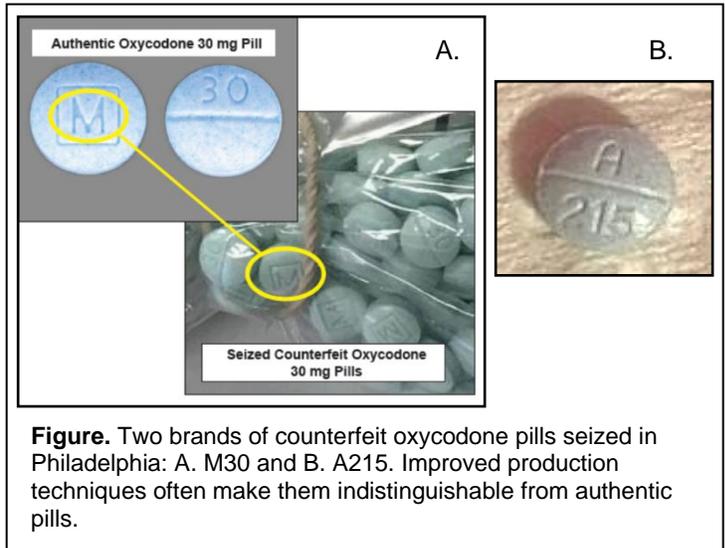


Figure. Two brands of counterfeit oxycodone pills seized in Philadelphia: A. M30 and B. A215. Improved production techniques often make them indistinguishable from authentic pills.

Fentanyl has been identified in pills made to resemble authentic pharmaceutical opioid tablets (**Figure**). The Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) Philadelphia Field Division reports that counterfeit pills were first observed in 2015 (<http://bit.ly/DEAdrugavailabilitySept20>). Previously acquired through Dark Web suppliers, these pills are now being seized with increasing frequency and quantity in Philadelphia. While improved production often makes them indistinguishable from authentic pills, locally produced counterfeit pills have been recognized to contain “speckles”, appear off-color from legitimate tablets, or have distorted pressing/markings.

Providers should be alert to the potential for a fentanyl overdose even if the drug consumed is reported to be a pharmaceutical pill purchased on the street or a non-opioid drug. Clinical toxicology testing should be performed to detect fentanyl when drug contamination is suspected. The Philadelphia Department of Public Health is working to raise awareness about the presence of fentanyl in drugs purchased on the street, including those appearing to be controlled prescription pills, and to distribute naloxone to populations at highest risk.

While unintentional drug overdose is not reportable by name in Philadelphia, PDPH is requesting the reporting of de-identified or aggregate information on patients suspected of fentanyl poisoning following ingestion of a counterfeit pill. Such events can be reported to the Philadelphia Department of Public Health at 215-686-5196.

Patient resources:

- Naloxone
 - Learn how to get and use naloxone – www.phillynaloxone.com
- Substance Use Disorder Treatment
 - Behavioral Health Services Initiative (uninsured): 1-215-546-1200
 - Community Behavioral Health (Medicaid): 1-888-545-2600
 - <http://dbhids.org/addiction-services>