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NEWS IN REVIEW



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IN THIS ISSUE

Deadly Drug: Fentanyl (Duration 17:42)

Fentanyl is a prescribed pain medication, but it's fast becoming one of the most deadly street drugs in Canada. One hundred times more potent than morphine, this seemingly innocuous drug is relatively easy to get. Overdoses are growing at an alarming rate, and not just among hardened users. Now health officials are sounding the alarm.

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DEADLY DRUG: Fentanyl

VIDEO REVIEW

Before viewing

His friends described him as full of life. An occasional drug user, Jack Bodie and a friend made the decision to take “fake 80s” one night. A short time after taking the drug both teens were found unconscious in an East Vancouver park. While his friend recovered, Jack Bodie died of an overdose. Authorities later revealed that the pill Bodie had taken was oxycodone laced with fentanyl.



1. The Latin expression “caveat emptor” is translated as “let the buyer beware.” How is this relevant when it comes to the purchase of street drugs?

Viewing

1. What is the appeal of fentanyl to drug users?

2. Why are fentanyl overdoses becoming very common?

3. How many Canadians have died as a direct or indirect result of fentanyl in the past six years?

4. While Ontario has reported the largest number of fentanyl-influenced deaths, British Columbia seems to be the new hotbed of fentanyl use. Why is this the case?

5. Fentanyl is up to:
- ☐ 10 times stronger than morphine.
 - ☐ 100 times stronger than morphine.
 - ☐ 1 000 times stronger than morphine.
6. On one Sunday, Vancouver authorities reported 16 cases of fentanyl overdoses — six of those coming in just one hour. How were most of those fentanyl doses ingested or taken by users?
-
-
7. What evidence is there that fentanyl abuse has become a national problem?
-
-
8. Why is fentanyl an attractive option for drug users?
-
-
9. Why did Lee Saikaley think fentanyl was a “clean drug”?
-
-
10. Why was Lee surprised when his friend Allisa died?
-
-
11. Why does Dr. David Juurlink think that the abuse of drugs such as fentanyl and oxycodone have become common in Canada?
-
-
12. How has fentanyl become an “easy sell” for drug dealers?
-
-
13. How are doctors being fooled or duped by some of their patients?
-
-

14. How many people sell their monthly prescriptions to Dave?

☐ 5 ☐ 16 ☐ 21

15. How much can Dave make on just one fentanyl patch?

16. Why did Dave say he wouldn't sell fentanyl to first-time users?

17. What eventually happened to Dave?

Authorities believe the surge in fentanyl-related overdoses came when drug dealers began spiking their products with fentanyl to accentuate the effects of drugs like heroin and cocaine.

After viewing

Public health officials are encouraging drug users to take precautions when they are taking drugs that could be laced with fentanyl. First, the user should make sure they are not taking the drug when they are on their own. In fact, they should make sure that a person who is not going to take any drugs is with them. Second, they should only take a bit of the drug at a time to see what effects that drug will have on them. Third, they should have a dose of naloxone on hand. Naloxone temporarily reverses the effects of opioids and can stave off an overdose.

1. Are the steps listed for safer drug use realistic? Are drug users likely to follow these instructions? Why or why not?

2. Many public health units across Canada have made naloxone available free of charge for fentanyl, oxycodone and heroin users. Should they be doing this? Will this encourage drug use or will it help save lives? Explain.

THE STORY

Minds on

Did you know that Canadian doctors prescribe highly addictive painkillers like oxycodone and fentanyl at a staggering rate? In fact, Canada ranks just behind the United States when it comes to painkiller prescriptions with more than 30 million pills and patches legally distributed to pain-ridden Canadians per year.

1. Do you think the distribution of painkiller medication contributes to addiction and, eventually, illegal drug use?
2. Do you think health professionals should be steering people toward alternatives to pain medication like yoga, tai chi and meditation? Do you think these alternative practices help relieve people's pain or are painkillers a more reasonable option?

The rise of fentanyl

It slows the heart rate to a crawl, suppresses breathing and makes a person extremely drowsy. Initially created as an anesthetic in 1959, fentanyl emerged in patch form in the '90s to help people with chronic pain get through the day. Once drug addicts discovered the power and potency of the drug, it was just a matter of time before fentanyl found its way to the streets. Now it is the street drug of choice for many — addicts and occasional users alike — with overdose deaths reaching shocking numbers.

16 overdoses; six in one hour

An August weekend in Vancouver let all of Canada know that fentanyl was as lethal as authorities had been claiming. Within a 24-hour period, 16 people were rushed to hospital after overdosing on heroin laced with fentanyl — including six in just one hour. Authorities



According to the Canadian Centre on Substance Abuse, fentanyl kills one person every three days in Canada.

reported that the victims included long-time drug users along with occasional (sometimes called recreational) drug users. They said that the victims thought they were taking heroin and had no idea the drug had been spiked with fentanyl to enhance the high. Clearly the amateur chemists who concocted the heroin mixture gravely underestimated the potency of fentanyl.

What is fentanyl?

Fentanyl is a powerful opioid prescribed to people suffering from debilitating pain due to chronic conditions like cancer. It most commonly comes in the form of a patch that a patient affixes to their arm so that the drug can slowly release over several days. The drug also comes in pill form while injectable liquid fentanyl is reserved for clinical settings like hospitals. Regardless of the format, fentanyl abusers have found ways to increase the potency of the drug by transforming patches and pills into chemical compounds that can be smoked, snorted and injected.

The problem with fentanyl

Fentanyl's problematic nature becomes clear when you compare it to other drugs. Fentanyl is

up to 100 times more powerful than morphine and about 50 times more powerful than heroin. This level of potency explains the reason why the line between a powerful high and an overdose is so miniscule, with many drug users dying at the hands of the drug. In fact, doctors do not prescribe fentanyl unless patients have developed a level of tolerance to opiates (like morphine) or opioids (like oxycodone), which means first-time fentanyl users are particularly vulnerable to the drug.

Public health crisis

Fentanyl has proven so deadly that health officials across Canada have declared a public health crisis in relation to fentanyl-related

Fentanyl is often used to enhance drugs like heroin and cocaine. It is known by the street names green monsters, greenies, beans, green apples, 80s, fake 80s, shady 80s, stickies, patches, fake heroin and fake oxy.

deaths. With at least 655 overdose deaths between 2009 and 2014 across the nation blamed on fentanyl — that's a shocking death every three days — the ministries of health in every province are trying to find ways to educate the public and stop fentanyl's deadly progression.

To consider

1. Why are Canadian authorities identifying fentanyl abuse as a public health crisis?
2. Why is fentanyl considered to be especially dangerous?
3. What is fentanyl's appeal? Why do drug users — addicts and occasional users alike — seek the high associated with fentanyl?

DRUG DIVERSION

The rise in popularity of fentanyl can be directly attributed to laws forcing the manufacturers of drugs containing oxycodone to create a tamper-proof pill. In the days before fentanyl became the street drug of choice, users were routinely getting their hands on “oxy” and finding a variety of ways to enhance the effects of the drug — be it smoking, snorting or shooting up. The tamper-proof pill made it more difficult to manipulate the drug so users started turning to oxycodone’s synthetic opioid cousin, fentanyl, for their next high. Both oxycodone and fentanyl are drugs prescribed by doctors for people with chronic pain conditions. They are very powerful and can provide pain relief for suffering individuals for hours and, in the case of fentanyl patches, days. However, these drugs are often obtained by people who are channeling them to the streets in a process called drug diversion.

Drug diversion comes in two forms. The first involves a patient who convinces their doctor that they need a drug like fentanyl to manage their pain. Instead of taking the prescribed medication they sell the drug either to a dealer or an amateur chemist who manipulates the drug into something that can be snorted, smoked or injected.

The second form of drug diversion involves health care workers who steal drugs from hospitals and

Oxycodone and fentanyl are classified as opioids because they are chemically or synthetically manufactured. Morphine and codeine are considered opiates because they are derived naturally from the poppy plant.

either sell the drugs or use them themselves. The most famous case of drug diversion in recent memory involved radiologic technologist David Kwiatkowski. From 2002 until 2012, Kwiatkowski moved from hospital to hospital across the United States, stealing drugs for his personal use. Eventually he began stealing fentanyl from cardiac patients. He would take syringes full of the drug, inject them into himself and replace the fentanyl with saline — an essentially harmless liquid. In this way, he would get high and the patients would miss their dose of painkillers. However, the syringes were far from harmless since Kwiatkowski carried the hepatitis C virus. Shortly after his arrest in 2012, authorities discovered that Kwiatkowski had infected over 45 people with hepatitis C, with one person dying prior to a judge sentencing him to 39 years in prison.

Drug diversion is one feature that distinguishes fentanyl from street drugs like marijuana and cocaine. While weed and coke are grown and manufactured in the realm of illegal street drugs, fentanyl is often diverted from the domain of legally prescribed medication to the streets.

A 2013 study by the Canadian Centre on Substance Abuse found that Canada is second in the world when it comes to prescribing highly addictive opioid drugs like fentanyl. The U.S. lays claim to the number one spot.

To consider

1. What are the two forms of drug diversion?
2. Why did a judge sentence David Kwiatkowski to 39 years in prison?
3. In his book *Addicted Healers: 5 Key Signs Your Healthcare Professional May be Drug Impaired*, Dr. Ethan O. Bryson makes the claim that 12 to 15 per cent of health-care workers are addicts. How does this affect your opinion of the health-care system? Would you read Bryson’s book?
4. Police are quick to point out that drug diversion is just one way fentanyl is making its way to the streets. It is also being imported by dealers with connections in China and Turkey. Why does this further demonstrate that drug users have to be very careful when they purchase illegal drugs?

HOW DOES FENTANYL WORK?

Minds on

Amelia and Hardy Leighton thought they were taking a street drug that would help them forget their troubles and allow them to simply relax. What they wound up taking was an inhalant laced with enough fentanyl to kill them. They clearly didn't understand what they were dealing with when they purchased the drug from their dealer. The couple died from a fentanyl overdose. They left behind a two-year-old son and grieving family.

1. How does the story of Amelia and Hardy Leighton reveal the ignorance of street drug users when it comes to knowing what they are taking?
2. Is there a safe way to take drugs? Could the Leightons have avoided their deadly fate by doing something differently?

The synthetic painkiller

Fentanyl is a powerful synthetic painkiller that, like morphine, binds to the body's opiate receptors. The binding process leads to a spike in dopamine levels in the brain, causing the user to feel free of physical and emotional pain. In fact, fentanyl users often report feeling a state of profound happiness, called euphoria, when they take the drug.

However, this euphoric feeling is short lived. The high is followed by a devastating low and, as is the problem with all opioids, the user can and will develop a tolerance for the drug. This means that,



with the passage of time, the user will have to take more of the drug to get the desired result. For many, the initial high creates a desire to frequently return to that state and the cycle of addiction begins.

Overall, fentanyl is a depressant that slows everything down so that a person is free of pain while simultaneously quelling anxiety with a false sense of euphoria. In addition to the problem of addiction, fentanyl brings with it a myriad of side effects that include: drowsiness, dizziness, fainting, lack of alertness, constipation, nausea and vomiting. For a person who has overdosed on the drug, they may experience some or all of these symptoms: clammy skin, seizures, severe drowsiness, pinpoint pupils, slowed heartbeat, low blood pressure and severe breathing problems.

It should be noted that doctors prescribe fentanyl to people with chronic pain who have already developed a tolerance for other opiate or opioid medications.

To consider

1. How does fentanyl work?
2. Describe a fentanyl high.
3. What are the side effects of fentanyl? Do you think these side effects are enough to deter people from taking the drug?

Fentanyl is believed to be the lethal ingredient mixed into an invisible gas used by Russian police to knock out Chechen terrorists holding 750 hostages in a Moscow theatre in 2002. While the gas brought the crisis to an end, it also caused the death of 117 hostages.