



Alert: HFSC Finds Fentanyl in Counterfeit Pharmaceuticals

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

The Houston Forensic Science Center's drug analysts have found dangerous fentanyl in fake pharmaceuticals and powders 10 times since the start of the year. The findings in Houston follow a national trend that the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration labeled a "fentanyl crisis" in a brief released in July 2016.

Fentanyl and fentanyl derivatives are dangerous because they are more lethal than other illicit drugs, and it can take just about two milligrams for a user to overdose, according to the DEA. Fentanyl also threaten law enforcement, forensic analysts and first responders because a lethal dose can be accidentally inhaled or absorbed through the skin. HFSC has taken extra precautions in its laboratory to protect analysts from the potentially lethal impact of fentanyl.

HFSC has twice found the drug or its derivatives in powders, and eight other times in fake pharmaceuticals.

The fake pharmaceuticals laced with fentanyl are what prompted the DEA to issue its July intelligence brief. These can be particularly dangerous because the user believes they are buying a legitimate pharmaceutical without a prescription _ such as Oxycodone or Xanax _ and overdose because they are unaware the fake pill contains fentanyl. The media has reported that such fentanyl-laced pharmaceuticals caused the death of pop star Prince.

The DEA notes that between August 2013 and the end of 2015 U.S. law enforcement agencies have seized at least 239 kilograms of illicitly produced fentanyl. Between late 2013 and late 2014, more than 700 fentanyl-related deaths occurred in the United States.

The DEA states that the current crisis is more serious than one in 2006 when heroin was laced with fentanyl. At that time, one clandestine laboratory in Mexico was mixing fentanyl in heroin. Currently, however, the fentanyl crisis is largely being traced to China, and pill press operations are being found across North America.

The DEA reports that in March and April, 52 overdoses and 10 deaths in Sacramento were traced to counterfeit Norco pills that contained fentanyl. Nine people died between January and March in Pinellas County, Florida from fentanyl-laced counterfeit Xanax pills.

HFSC will continue to monitor the situation in Houston and keep the public informed.

HFSC is a local government corporation that provides forensic services to the City of Houston and other local agencies. HFSC is overseen by a Board of Directors appointed by the Mayor of Houston and confirmed by the Houston City Council. Its management structure is designed to be responsive to a 2009 recommendation by the National Academy of Sciences that called for crime laboratories to be independent of law enforcement and prosecutorial branches of government.

HFSC currently has eight forensic sections.

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