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Subject: Advisory - Possible Increased Risk of Fentanyl Overdose From Black Tar Heroin in Denver - November 12, 2019

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Recipients: HAN Community Members.
From: TRI-COUNTY HEALTH DEPARTMENT
Adams, Arapahoe and Douglas County, Colorado

Recipient Instructions: For your information. No response required.

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HEALTH ALERT
Possible Increased Risk of Fentanyl Overdose From Black Tar Heroin in Denver
November 12, 2019

**Health care providers: Please distribute in your office**

KEY POINTS:

- Denver Police Department recently analyzed a seized sample of what appeared to be “black tar heroin.” It contained no heroin but instead the synthetic opioid fentanyl.
- Fentanyl is sometimes added covertly to illicit drugs. People who use these substances are often unaware of the contamination.
- Fentanyl has much higher potency than heroin and may cause accidental overdose. Contamination of illicit or counterfeit opioid drugs can contribute to opioid overdose and death.
- Fentanyl overdose should be suspected in persons presenting with signs and symptoms of opioid overdose. Such overdose may require greater quantities of naloxone (Narcan) for reversal, and repeated doses for possible relapse.
- Providers should advise people who use illicit opioids or with opioid use disorders about possible local and current increased risk of fentanyl contamination. People using illicit drugs should be:
  - Advised to seek treatment for use disorder if willing.
  - Advised not to use drugs alone.
  - Advised to use slower absorption methods (snorting, ingestion) over injection.
  - Advised to use a small amount of a substance first to test potency.
  - Prescribed naloxone in case overdose reversal is needed.
BACKGROUND:

Public health and safety authorities in Denver have collaborated to track indicators that suggest potential increased levels of fentanyl contamination of illicit drugs (including prescription drugs purchased on the street). The detection of fentanyl replacing heroin in what otherwise appeared to be “black tar heroin” is a new and dangerous local observation.

Such contamination has been associated with high rates of opioid overdose in other regions. People using contaminated drugs may not recognize their increased risk for overdose. Health care providers can take certain actions to reduce the risk of overdose, and to treat overdose more effectively.

Fentanyl is a powerful synthetic opioid, more potent than heroin and morphine. Overdoses happen faster and are harder to stop. Fentanyl comes in pills, pure powder, and powder mixed with other drugs. Fentanyl cannot be seen, tasted, or smelled when mixed into other drugs.

RECOMMENDATIONS/GUIDANCE FOR PATIENTS

1. Patients known or suspected of opioid drug misuse or opioid use disorder should be advised of these recent local observations and take action to reduce their risk. Such actions include:
   a. Enrolling in opioid use disorder treatment programs, or otherwise avoiding opioid use.
   b. Don’t use drugs alone. Ensure someone is present who could respond to a possible emergency by dialing 911 (Bystanders who call 911 and aid victims are not subject to prosecution.)
   c. Avoid mixing drugs. Don’t mix opioids with alcohol or benzodiazepines
   d. Test a small amount before using to note unusual effects.
   e. Using slower absorption methods like snorting or swallowing rather than injection. If injecting, inject slower.
   f. Avoid using black tar heroin or being particularly cautious about its use.

2. Providers should prescribe naloxone for emergency use to people using drugs or people (such as friends or family) who may observe drug use and overdose. Prescribing and lay carrying of naloxone is legal for this purpose.

3. Patients suspected of having opioid overdose who may have ingested fentanyl may require higher doses and additional treatments with naloxone, given fentanyl’s potency. Those who receive naloxone in community settings should be monitored in emergency departments for possible overdose relapse.

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Testing

When opioid overdose is suspected, exposure to fentanyl can be assessed using urine or serum toxicology testing. However, fentanyl testing is not part of routine substance use screens and should be ordered specifically.

If fentanyl contamination is suspected in a patient with drug overdose, contact local law enforcement or poison control with information about the type of drug used and when/where procured if information can be obtained from the patient. Such information can be shared with governmental authorities without identifying the patient.

People using drugs may be testing drugs using test strips for fentanyl. These strips are difficult to interpret and not routinely recommended, but it is reasonable to avoid drugs with positive results.

For more information:

- Denver metro area Syringe Access Programs
  - TCHD Aurora Syringe Access Services
    303-363-3077
    1475 Lima St, Aurora, 80010
    Monday –Thursday 1pm to 4pm
  - Harm Reduction Action Center
    303-572-7800
    231 E. Colfax Denver, CO 80203
    Monday-Friday 9am-12pm
  - Access Point Denver
    303-837-0166
    6260 E. Colfax Ave Denver, CO 80220
  - Lifepoint Denver
    720-385-6898
    Mobile Syringe Services- call for information