

'Unprecedented' overdose epidemic from fentanyl in US

25 August 2016

Painkillers containing illegally made fentanyl, a synthetic drug up to 100 times more potent than morphine, are responsible for a surge in overdose deaths in the United States, health authorities said Thursday.

Pop legend Prince, who died of an accidental overdose of [fentanyl](#) in April, is the latest high-profile victim of the addictive and often-counterfeit pills that are sweeping the nation.

A new report by the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention found "substantial increases in fatal synthetic opioid-involved overdoses, primarily driven by fentanyl-involved [overdose deaths](#)" in multiple states since 2013.

"In contrast to the 2005-2007 fentanyl overdose outbreak, when deaths were confined to several states, the current epidemic is unprecedented in scope," the CDC said in its *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report*.

Fentanyl has been used for anesthesia purposes since the 1960s, and today it is often prescribed for cancer pain and other chronic ailments.

Illegally made versions of it began to skyrocket in 2013. Traffickers often incorporate it in counterfeit pills or add it to heroin, which can kill the drug user by shutting down his or her respiratory system.

Although fentanyl deaths are not reported separately in national data registries, CDC researchers were able to outline the scope of the problem by analyzing synthetic-opioid deaths, along with law enforcement seizures of drug products that tested positive for fentanyl.

"Analyses also were conducted on data from 27 states with consistent [death](#) certificate reporting of the drugs involved in overdoses," said the study.

Researchers found that law enforcement seizures

of products with fentanyl rose 426 percent from 2013 to 2014.

Meanwhile, synthetic-opioid deaths increased by 79 percent during the same period, and researchers found that police fentanyl discoveries were "were strongly correlated with increases in synthetic opioid deaths."

There was no change in fentanyl prescription rates that could have explained this rise in use and deaths, the report said.

When researchers combined data from state reports, they estimated that over 1,000 more people died from fentanyl over the course of one year.

"Combining results across the state reports, total fentanyl deaths during 2013-2014 increased by 1,008, from 392 (2013) to 1,400 (2014)," said the CDC.

Eight [states](#) were most affected by the epidemic: Massachusetts, Maine, New Hampshire, Ohio, Florida, Kentucky, Maryland, and North Carolina.

Last year, the US Drug Enforcement Administration and CDC issued nationwide alerts calling illicitly manufactured fentanyl a threat to public health and safety.

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