Fentanyl: It’s Not Just a Patch Anymore

Fentanyl is a synthetic (man-made) opioid introduced into medical practice as an intravenous anesthetic under the trade name of Sublimaze in the 1960’s. It is 50-times more potent than heroin and 100-times more potent than morphine. There are two types of fentanyl:

- Pharmaceutical fentanyl, which is primarily prescribed to manage acute and chronic pain associated with advanced cancer. In 2015, there were 6.5 million fentanyl prescriptions dispensed in the U.S. It is currently available in the dosage forms of intravenous, oral lozenges (“lollipops”), sprays, and transdermal patches.
- Non-pharmaceutical fentanyl, which is illicitly manufactured, and is often mixed with heroin and/or cocaine to increase the drug’s effect. Fentanyl is abused for its euphoric effects and often used as a direct substitute for heroin in opioid dependent individuals. This is a dangerous substitute because it leads to respiratory depression and death. According to multi-state death reports, fentanyl-related deaths jumped from 550 deaths in 2013 to over 2,000 deaths in 2014 and again in 2015. A breakdown of death rates by region as shown:

Desperation comes at a deadly price. Fentanyl patches are abused by removing the gel contents from the patches (often stolen from relatives), then injecting or ingesting these contents. Patches have been known to be frozen, cut into pieces and dissolved in the mouth. Therefore, it’s important to screen for fentanyl with known heroin use and in places like addiction/sober houses, workplace, and clinical settings.

References