

# Public Health Community Alert: Fentanyl in Yamhill County

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Multnomah County Sheriff's Office, 2021

Despite improved improving levels of opioid prescribing and decreases in heroin use, health and law enforcement officials are concerned about an increase in overdoses from altered pills and other substances laced with fentanyl.

When talking about fake pills containing fentanyl, Dr. Koenig, the medical officer of Yamhill County, says “the risk (of overdose) has been enhanced.” Taking any medication not prescribed to you or taking medications that are not from a pharmacy is highly discouraged. But for individuals who choose to, the risk is greater than ever due to an increase in substances laced with fentanyl.

Local youth have not been spared from this growing problem. Students purchasing Oxycontin or Xanax from individuals they meet on social media platforms have unknowingly received pills laced with fentanyl. Dr. Koenig recommends anyone who uses prescription or non-prescription opioids carry multiple doses of the overdose-reversal drug naloxone (name-brand "Narcan").

Pills, called “Blues”, for their common color, or “M30s” for the stamp commonly found on each pill are of immense concern. The counterfeit tablets are so well-made that even experienced users cannot tell the difference between a fake pill and a pill manufactured commercially.

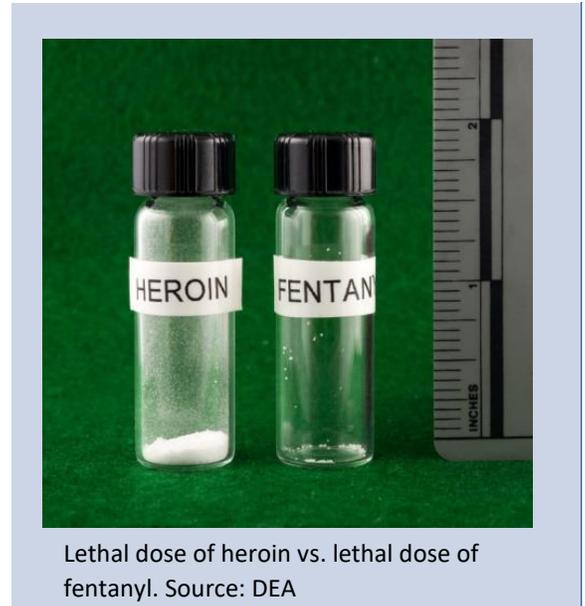
Counterfeit pills are increasingly testing positive for fentanyl and are frequently disguised as other drugs and medications. The federal Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA) has found fentanyl in opioids, ADHD medications and even anxiety medications. Medications

like Oxycodone, Percocet, Adderall and Xanax are just some of the common medications bought illicitly that might be laced with fentanyl. This deception can be deadly if an individual believes they are taking a harmless dose.

- One in four fake pills tested by DEA labs contained a potentially lethal dose of fentanyl.
- Fake pills are sold online and on apps that are popular with teens, who may believe they are buying something safe for anxiety or depression or what they believe to be “study drugs”.
- Teens often believe that all medicine is safe and may be unaware that a pill that appears safe, is not.

## What is Fentanyl?

Fentanyl is prescribed by doctors for pain and is stronger than morphine. Pharmaceutical fentanyl was originally developed for the pain management of cancer patients, applied in a long-acting patch on the skin. Fentanyl is increasingly being made illegally and distributed as a street drug and mixed — often unknowingly to the user— with cocaine, cannabis or benzodiazepines.



Even in small doses, fentanyl can stop an individual from breathing. Counterfeit pills are especially dangerous because the amount of fentanyl may vary from pill to pill - even among pills from the same batch. Just two milligrams of fentanyl — the weight of a mosquito—could be fatal.

The DEA says the surge in counterfeit, fentanyl-laced opioid pills started just a few years ago. But by 2020, the federal agency deemed illicit fentanyl primarily responsible for the nation’s ongoing opioid crisis.

### Where is it Coming From?

In 2019, nearly half of law enforcement officers surveyed in Oregon reported seizing counterfeit pills, according to data from the Oregon-Idaho High Intensity Drug Trafficking Area Program.

Most of the illicit supply comes from outside the United States, where clandestine laboratories synthesize fentanyl into counterfeit oxycodone pills — blue, round, stamped with “M” on one side and “30” on the other. They’re increasingly referred to on the street as “M30s.”

But Cam Strahm, assistant special agent in charge of the DEA’s Oregon District Office, said he has seen the counterfeit pills in an array of colors besides blue, from red to orange to yellow. In early 2021, Yamhill County Public Health was notified of deaths in the Eugene area attributed to "snorlax", a combination of Molly/Ecstasy. The pills in that instance tested positive for fentanyl.



Two Milligrams of fentanyl (pictured above) is enough to kill someone. Source: DEA

Strahm said the increase in demand for counterfeit opioid pills correlates with tighter restrictions on legal prescriptions of opioids.

### Overdose Deaths

Recent provisional drug overdose death counts through May 2020 suggest an acceleration of overdose deaths during the COVID-19 pandemic. According to the CDC, overdose deaths in the US involving

synthetic opioids were nearly 12 times higher in 2019 than in 2013. Over 81,000 drug overdose deaths occurred in the United States in the 12 months ending in May 2020, the highest number of overdose deaths ever recorded in a 12-month period, according to recent provisional data from CDC.

In neighboring Washington County during 2021 alone, the Westside Interagency Narcotics Team seized more than 17,000 pills, with most suspected as being counterfeit “M30” Oxycodone pills. During the entire year prior, that team seized fewer than 14,000 pills.

Investigators with Multnomah County Sheriff’s Office say they’re seeing similar numbers. In one month alone last year, their Special Investigations Unit seized more than 5,000 oxycodone pills, many of them suspected of containing fentanyl.

## **Prevention and Intervention**

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Even experts struggle to tell a fake pill from a real one. The best way to prevent an overdose from counterfeit pills is to avoid any pills from friends, sold on the street, or obtained through web sites that don't require a prescription, said

Multnomah County’s Harm Reduction Program Supervisor Kelsi Junge last April. “Counterfeit pills are not all the same. One phony pill seems OK, another pill from the same batch could kill a person.”

“People who do choose to use pills outside of a care plan developed with a healthcare provider should take steps to reduce the risk of overdose,” Junge said. She recommends that those who elect to use pills should never do so alone, should they need to be revived in the case of an overdose. Signs and symptoms of an overdose and what should be done in response can be found below.

## Symptoms of Overdose

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- Clammy skin
- Dizziness and confusion
- Lips and fingernails unusually colored
- Limp body
- Slow, weak or no breathing
- Snoring or gurgling
- Vomiting or foaming at the mouth
- Difficult to or not able to awaken

## What to Do

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- Call **911** - It is important to call for medical care whether or not you are sure it is an opioid related overdose
- Administer **naloxone** if you have it
- **Stay** with the person until help arrives

Naloxone or NARCAN, a medication that counteracts the effects of opioids, can reverse an overdose.

Anyone who uses prescribed or unprescribed opioids can get naloxone from a pharmacy. Health insurance may cover the cost of Naloxone/Narcan. Kits are also available from **Provoking Hope** at 971-261-2259.

If you need help, call Yamhill County's Crisis Resource at  
**Yamhill County Mental Health Crisis Line | 1.844.842.8200**



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