

Fentanyl Safety Awareness

Why Fentanyl Awareness?

Although fentanyl does not pose the same risk for restoration workers as it does for police officers and first responders, it is still important to be aware of the dangers that fentanyl possesses and how to correctly identify it on the job. Fentanyl exists in both a legal and an illicit form and, as a restorer, you are most likely to encounter prescription fentanyl. Fentanyl is often prescribed in addition to morphine and is used in both human and veterinary medicine to manage pain after a surgery or to treat chronic pain in patients tolerant to other painkillers.

What is Fentanyl?

Fentanyl is a synthetic opioid drug. An opioid is a class of drug that is used to reduce pain and some examples of other opioids are oxycodone, hydrocodone, morphine, and methadone. Fentanyl, however, is amongst the most potent opioid. It is 50 times more potent than heroin and 50 to 100 times more powerful than morphine and acts quickly to depress the central nervous system and respiratory functions. To put this into perspective, it would only take 2 to 3 milligrams to cause respiratory depression, arrest, and even death. Visually, 2 to 3 milligrams of fentanyl are about the same size as 5 to 7 grains of table salt (see figure 1).



Figure 1: Fentanyl Crystals

What Does Fentanyl Look Like?

Prescription fentanyl comes in various forms, which include a fentanyl patch, fentanyl injection, fentanyl spray, lozenges called “lollipops”, and fentanyl dissolving tablets. The most common name brands of fentanyl are Actiq, Fentora, Duragesic, Subsys, Abstral, and Lazanda. Illicit forms of fentanyl can appear as a white, pink, purple, blue, or green powder. However, fentanyl purchased on the streets is rarely seen in its powder form, as it is usually combined with or hidden in other drugs. As such, it is important to treat any pill or powder with caution (see figures 2 and 3).



Figure 2: Fentanyl Pills and



Figure 3: Fentanyl Pills

Routes of Occupational Exposure

Environmental services, response, and cleanup workers have been identified as a worker population that has the potential for fentanyl exposure, so it is vital to know how you may be exposed to it. The most common ways accidental fentanyl exposure can occur is through inhalation of powders, incidental ingestion, and skin absorption. While accidental skin contact with dry products, such as powders or pills, is not likely to cause overdoses, skin contact with liquid or gel, such as a patch or nasal spray, can be highly toxic and even deadly (see figure 4).



Figure 1: Various Illicit Forms of Fentanyl

How to Protect Yourself from Exposure

The easiest and most effective way to avoid accidental fentanyl exposure is to wear protective gloves on all job sites. Something as simple as wearing latex or nitrile gloves can protect you from an accidental fentanyl overdose. While you most likely won't go into a job expecting the presence of fentanyl, you should still take this most basic precaution when handling anything you might suspect to contain fentanyl. Additionally, if you discover any powder avoid actions that may cause the powder to become airborne. If you suspect it is fentanyl, or any other illicit opioid, leave the premises and contact the authorities. In most cases, simply wearing the proper PPE can protect against any risk of accidental exposure.

Signs of Fentanyl Exposure

- Slow Breathing or No Breathing
- Cold or Clammy Skin
- Drowsiness or Unresponsiveness
- Disorientation
- Constricted or Pinpoint Pupils

Reducing Illicit Drug Exposure: Safety Measures for First Responders

WHEN YOU SUSPECT ILLICIT DRUGS ARE PRESENT:

DO	+	DO
wear your personal protective equipment.		wash your hands with soap and water.
DO NOT	+	DO NOT
touch your eyes, nose, and mouth.		use hand sanitizer, eat, drink, smoke, or use the bathroom.

 Centers for Disease Control and Prevention
National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health

*Illicit drug products include but are not limited to opioids, cocaine, cannabinoids, methamphetamines, heroin, cathinones, etc.
Learn more at: [cdc.gov/niosh/topics/fentanyl/risk](https://www.cdc.gov/niosh/topics/fentanyl/risk)

What to do if Exposure Occurs

If you or other technicians exhibit any of the above symptoms, call 911 immediately. Naloxone is the only treatment for an opioid overdose, so calling paramedics is a must. If you suspect you have been exposed to fentanyl, do not touch your eyes, mouth, or nose as this can accelerate or worsen any symptoms. Fentanyl is water soluble, so wash skin thoroughly with soap and water. Absolutely do not use hand sanitizer or any other alcohol-based cleansers as they can enhance absorption through the skin. If you suspect your clothing, shoes, or PPE had been contaminated, either clean thoroughly or dispose of the contaminated items.

More Information

The information presented in this reference article comes from a large number of sources including:

[Fentanyl – A Briefing Guide for First Responders, Drug Enforcement Administration](#)

[Prevention of Occupational Exposure to Fentanyl and Other Opioids, National Institute of Environmental Health Sciences](#)

[Fentanyl – Safety Recommendations for First Responders, Whitehouse.gov](#)

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