

County of Santa Clara

Public Health Department



Health Officer
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HEALTH UPDATE: Opioid Overdoses from Fake Pills

DATE: September 30, 2019

TO: Schools, after school programs, parent and teacher organizations, and other organizations serving youth

FROM: Sara H. Cody, MD
Health Officer and Public Health Director

Earlier you received a Health Advisory from me regarding fake pills containing the powerful and deadly fentanyl. This memo provides additional information, particularly about naloxone and guidance on talking with youth.

Why is this important?

Fentanyl is a very powerful opioid drug — 80-100 times more powerful than morphine — and exposure to even small amounts can cause overdose and death. The County Medical Examiner has reported 44 opioid deaths* from January 1, 2019 to August 31, 2019. Of the 44 deaths, 11 have involved fentanyl, including those of a 15 and 16-year-old. Several of these deaths have been linked to these fake pills containing the chemical fentanyl, made to look like a 30 mg oxycodone prescription pill. People who took these pills thinking they were taking oxycodone were unaware that they were taking lethal doses of fentanyl.

What are fake pills?

Many opioid pills are now made by counterfeiting organizations. These pills are not prescribed, stolen, or resold by or from verified pharmaceutical companies, and there is no connection between their appearance and their ingredients. They are fake pills made to look like real prescription medications.

No one should take a pill that was not obtained directly from a pharmacy. Pills given by a friend or bought from others also should not be taken. Doing so could have deadly consequences.

What is being done?

The District Attorney and multiple law enforcement agencies across the county discovered that this fentanyl-containing fake pill may be in wide circulation around the county and state and have seized large quantities from multiple locations across the county. The Public Health Department has alerted healthcare providers. The District Attorney is working with the Public Health Department and other agencies to create a rapid response team.

Because two of the deaths occurred in teenagers, the County of Santa Clara Public Health Department wants to ensure that educators and others who work with adolescents and young adults are aware of the fake drugs and know what to look for. Public Health is working with partners on communication efforts to inform the public of the threat posed by these fake pills.

**These numbers are expected to change as the Medical Examiner continues to receive toxicology reports on other open cases.*

What actions should I take?

Know the signs and symptoms that might indicate an opioid overdose. Signs and symptoms may include nodding off, falling asleep in class, droopy eyes, pinpoint pupils, appearing “zoned out,” barely being able to stay awake, constipation, etc. A person who has these symptoms from stress or sleep deprivation will be able to wake up; a person who has overdosed will not.

There is a drug called naloxone (also known by its brand name, Narcan®), which can reverse the effects of an opioid overdose. It is usually available as a nasal or injectable medication. When given during an overdose, naloxone can restore breathing within 2-8 minutes.

California state regulations permit pharmacists to prescribe naloxone without a prescription. Pharmacists are required to provide counseling and education for anyone trying to obtain naloxone. Contact a pharmacy to confirm that they have naloxone available.

Additionally, the Santa Clara County Opioid Overdose Prevention Project offers free naloxone training and kits every Friday from 1 to 2 p.m. at the following sites:

- Central Valley Clinic, 2425 Enborg Lane, San Jose
- Alexian Health Clinic, 2101 Alexian Drive, Suite B, San Jose
- South County Clinic, 90 Highland Avenue, Building J, San Martin

Visit sccgov.org/sccoopp or email SCCOOPP@hhs.sccgov.org for more information.

What can I say to young people?

Remember the main messages to young people are:

- Fake pills can kill.
- Do not take a pill that you (or a parent/guardian filling a prescription for you) did not get directly from a pharmacy.
- Do not take pills given to you by a friend.
- Do not buy pills from your friends or other people.
- FAKE pills look like real pills, but they can be deadly.

Please share this Health Advisory widely. Thank you.

Where can I get more information?

For general information on the opioid epidemic:

- cdc.gov/opioids
- hhs.gov/opioids/about-the-epidemic

For more information on fake pills:

safemedicines.org/policymakers-media/fentanyl-pills-ravaging-american-communities



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PUBLIC HEALTH WARNING

**MAJOR UPTICK IN FATAL FENTANYL OVERDOSES AND SEIZURES OF
COUNTERFEIT 30-MG OXYCODONE PILLS CONTAINING FENTANYL**

Since June 2019, Law Enforcement Agencies in Santa Clara County have seized a large number of counterfeit 30-milligram Percocet pills that contain fentanyl—not oxycodone hydrochloride—as their sole active ingredient. The seizures have occurred all across the county, by different law enforcement agencies, and from different subjects. The tablets visually appear to be the pharmaceutically manufactured version—they are circular in shape, light blue to light green in color, and have an “M” inside a square stamped on one side and a “30” stamped on the other side. Numerous fatal overdoses have been tied to these tablets, with a strong uptick in fatal overdoses in August 2019.

This office still continues to see the presence of fentanyl in counterfeit Xanax “bars” and other pills, in heroin and, increasingly, in powder cocaine.

Brian Buckelew

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