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Asking for help is a professional strength; using resources early keeps small issues from becoming crises.

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Youth Need to Know: ONE COUNTERFEIT FENTANYL PILL CAN BE DEADLY

As detailed in many previous *Employee Drug Education Newsletters*, fentanyl has changed the risks surrounding illicit drug use in the United States. This powerful synthetic opioid can be lethal in a very small amount, and a single exposure may be enough to cause death. Yet many adolescents do not recognize how serious that danger is. This knowledge gap matters to every employee with young people in their life.

Understanding the hidden danger can help protect you, your family, and the young people in your life.

A Dangerous Gap in Awareness

Researchers report that a majority of eighth-graders and approximately one-third of tenth- and twelfth-graders do not believe that using fentanyl once or twice presents a great risk. That perception is dangerously mistaken. Fentanyl can suppress breathing rapidly, and there is no reliable way for an individual to judge whether an illicit pill contains fentanyl—or how much it contains—simply by looking at it.

Drug poisonings and overdoses now rank third among the leading causes of death for children and

teenagers in the United States. Although fewer adolescents are using illicit drugs overall, a growing percentage are dying from overdoses. Fentanyl is involved in at least 75% of adolescent overdose deaths. In other words, fewer young people may be experimenting, but those who do can face a drug supply far more unpredictable and deadly than many realize.

The Counterfeit-Pill Threat

Fentanyl is up to 50 times more potent than heroin. For adolescents, the most common exposure is unintentional. A young person may believe that a pill is a familiar prescription medication, perhaps obtained from a friend, purchased online, or received through social media. In reality, the pill may be contaminated with fentanyl or made almost entirely from it. Counterfeit pills are manufactured to resemble legitimate medications, so appearance is not proof of safety.

This is why the warning to “avoid fentanyl” is not enough. Many young people who die from fentanyl never intended to take it. The useful message is direct: *Never take a pill that was not prescribed specifically for you and dispensed by a licensed pharmacy.*

A pill obtained elsewhere cannot be trusted, even if the seller claims it is authentic, a friend has taken similar pills before, or its color and markings appear genuine.

Start a Conversation That Can Save a Life

Young people may tune out a long lecture, but they can remember one clear fact: one counterfeit pill can kill. Choose a calm moment and explain that today's illicit drug supply is different from what existed years ago. Ask what they have heard about fentanyl and counterfeit medication. Listening first gives you a chance to correct misinformation without turning the conversation into an argument.

Avoid assuming that a responsible student, athlete, employee, or churchgoing teenager is automatically safe. Counterfeit pills may be sought for experimentation, pain, anxiety, sleep, studying, or simple curiosity. Emphasize that asking for help will always be safer than hiding a mistake. Fear of punishment should never keep someone from seeking emergency assistance when a possible overdose occurs.

Recognize an Emergency

A possible opioid overdose requires immediate emergency action. Warning signs can include an inability to wake the person, very slow or stopped breathing,

choking or gurgling sounds, limpness, and pale, gray, or bluish skin, lips, or fingernails.

Call 911 immediately. If naloxone is available, administer it according to its directions while emergency help is on the way. Naloxone can temporarily reverse an opioid overdose, but it is not a substitute for professional medical care.

Employees can help prevent tragedy by learning the facts, discussing them at home, and treating every non-pharmacy pill as potentially dangerous. If your workplace offers an employee assistance program or behavioral-health resources, learn how to access them before a crisis occurs. Seeking help for substance use, mental-health concerns, or medication questions is a sign of sound judgment, not weakness.

Knowledge Must Lead to Action

The central lesson is simple: fentanyl's danger is not limited to people who knowingly use opioids. It can reach adolescents through a counterfeit pill they believe is something else. Share this information with the young people you care about. Make sure they know that pills should come only from their own healthcare provider and a licensed pharmacy, that one use can be fatal, and that an overdose is always a 911 emergency. A brief conversation today may prevent an irreversible loss tomorrow.



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