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Carfentanil in Illicit Drug Supply

In July of 2024, the New York City Department of Health reported that carfentanil, a potent synthetic opioid drug, had been identified in multiple recent samples of street drugs sold as opioids. According to data from the NYC Health Department's Bureau of Vital Statistics and NYC Office of the Chief Medical Examiner, carfentanil was also involved in at least seven unintentional drug overdose deaths between January and June of 2024 in NYC.

Carfentanil has since been discovered in overdose autopsies throughout the United States and is suspected of being present in the U.S. heroin supply. According to the CDC, there were 238 carfentanil deaths nationwide between January and June of 2024. If carfentanil continues to spread, it could result in the deadliest drug crisis America has ever experienced.

Carfentanil Use

Carfentanil is an analogue of fentanyl and is one of the most potent opioid drugs available. It is manufactured for, and used in, veterinary medicine as an

anesthetic for large animals such as rhinoceroses, elephants, elks, and moose. Federal law restricts this drug to use by licensed veterinarians only. The licensed veterinarian also has to be a veterinarian engaged in zoo and exotic animal practice, wildlife management programs, or research. Carfentanil is not approved for use in domestic animals.

Potency, Symptoms, Side-Effects

Carfentanil is 10,000 times as potent as morphine and 100 times more powerful than fentanyl. It is intended for large animal use only. The drug's extreme potency makes it inappropriate for human use.

Carfentanil acts primarily on opioid receptors as an agonist. It induces similar effects of analgesia as other opioids, however, due to its potency, it will also induce strong effects such as complete and total sedation. Consequently, that is one of many reasons it is used only as a tranquilizer for large animals.

Carfentanil interacts predominately with the opioid receptors distributed in the brain, spinal cord, and other tissues. It exerts its principal pharmacologic effects on the central nervous system.

Carfentanil also depresses the respiratory center, depresses the cough reflex, and constricts the pupils. Symptoms include respiratory depression or arrest, drowsiness, disorientation, sedation, pinpoint pupils, and clammy skin. The onset of these symptoms usually occurs within minutes of exposure.

Because of its acute toxicity in humans, carfentanil has been designated as an illegal (Schedule II) controlled substance. The drug is so dangerous, any expired or waste carfentanil must be disposed of taking into consideration applicable DEA, EPA, and FDA regulations. It is not appropriate to dispose of the drug by flushing it down the toilet or discarding it in the trash. Alternatively, the drug must be returned to the manufacturer for proper disposal, being careful to properly label and securely package the material. Any waste pharmaceutical must be labeled, securely packaged, and transported by a state licensed medical waste contractor to dispose of by burial in a licensed hazardous or toxic waste landfill or incinerator.

Dangers of Use/Exposure

Carfentanil is a serious danger to public safety, first responder, medical, treatment, and laboratory personnel. When emergency personnel encounter carfentanil, they are trained to exercise extreme caution.

Only properly trained and outfitted law enforcement professionals should handle any substance suspected to contain carfentanil. The onset of adverse symptoms usually occurs within minutes of exposure and the exposed person must seek IMMEDIATE medical attention. Recreational use of drugs containing carfentanil has been known to cause sudden deep coma, hypotension, and respiratory arrest. Reversing the respiratory depression induced by carfentanil involves immediate intra-venous administration of naloxone or naltrexone, which is often difficult or impossible.

Carfentanil is relatively easy to produce in illicit drug labs and very small amounts can produce thousands of doses. This makes the drug extremely profitable. It is also easy to mix carfentanil into drugs like cocaine, methamphetamine, and heroin which means that carfentanil poses a profound threat to both public safety and public health in America.

Carfentanil was responsible for a surge in overdose deaths leading up to 2018, but due to more strenuous regulation, there was a periodic decline in prevalence of the drug. But now, due to its production in illicit labs, the recent resurgence of carfentanil is even more dangerous, destructive, and deadly.



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