

Montana Health Alert Network

# DPHHS HAN

## ADVISORY

### Cover Sheet

#### DATE

June 6, 2022

#### SUBJECT

Increased Fentanyl-related Fatalities in Montana

#### INSTRUCTIONS

**DISTRIBUTE** to your local HAN contacts. This HAN is intended for general sharing of information.

- Time for Forwarding: **As Soon As Possible**
- Please forward to DPHHS at [hhshan@mt.gov](mailto:hhshan@mt.gov)
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For LOCAL HEALTH DEPARTMENT reference only  
DPHHS Subject Matter Resource for more information regarding this HAN, contact:  
**Epidemiologist  
Chronic Disease Prevention and Health Promotion Bureau**  
Victoria Troeger, MSPH  
(406)-444-3170  
*For technical issues related to the HAN message contact the Emergency Preparedness Section at 1-406-444-0919*

DPHHS HAN Website:  
[www.han.mt.gov](http://www.han.mt.gov)

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#### Categories of Health Alert Messages:

**Health Alert:** conveys the highest level of importance; warrants immediate action or attention.

**Health Advisory:** provides important information for a specific incident or situation; may not require immediate action.

**Health Update:** provides updated information regarding an incident or situation; unlikely to require immediate action.

**Information Service:** passes along low level priority messages that do not fit other HAN categories and are for informational purposes only.

Please update your HAN contact information on the Montana Public Health Directory

# DPHHS HAN

## Information Sheet



### DATE

June 6, 2022

### SUBJECT

Increased Fentanyl-related Fatalities in Montana

### BACKGROUND

Fentanyl, a synthetic and short-acting opioid analgesic, is 50-100 times more potent than morphine and approved for managing acute or chronic pain associated with advanced cancer.<sup>1</sup> Although pharmaceutical fentanyl can be diverted for misuse, most cases of fentanyl-related morbidity and mortality have been linked to illicitly manufactured fentanyl and fentanyl analogs, collectively referred to as non-pharmaceutical fentanyl (NPF).<sup>2</sup> NPF is sold via illicit drug markets for its heroin-like effect and often mixed with heroin and/or cocaine as a combination product—with or without the user’s knowledge—to increase its euphoric effects. While NPF-related overdoses can be reversed with naloxone, a higher dose or multiple number of doses per overdose event may be required to revive a patient due to the high potency of NPF.<sup>3,4</sup>

### INFORMATION

The Montana Department of Public Health and Human Services (DPHHS) in conjunction with local law enforcement have identified a sharp increase in fatal overdoses across the state in the last two weeks. In the period from 5/22/2022 and 6/1/2022 there have been at least 8 fatal overdoses, likely due to fentanyl.

DPHHS data shows that Emergency Medical Services (EMS) responded to five calls related to overdose where the individual was pronounced dead on scene or upon arrival to the emergency department. Further data from law enforcement report three unattended overdose deaths.

- Decedents were between the ages of 24 to 60 years old; three-quarters were male
- Several decedents had a known history of opioid use disorder
- Blue M30 pills (likely illicitly manufactured fentanyl pressed into counterfeit pills) and other drug paraphernalia were located nearby several of the decedents
- Deaths occurred in Cascade, Custer, Gallatin, Lake, Lewis and Clark, and Yellowstone County

Additional information from law enforcement shows that fentanyl seizures across the state has increased dramatically; more fentanyl was seized in the first 3 months of 2022 than in the previous four years combined.

### RECOMMENDATIONS

#### Local Health Departments

1. Raise awareness among key partners and stakeholders to the widening profile of those at risk for fentanyl overdose, which increasingly includes persons misusing diverted prescribed oral pain and sedative medications.
2. Develop public health messaging about fentanyl, including fentanyl-laced counterfeit pills and fentanyl-related compounds that emphasizes the toxicity and potential lethality of the drug versus its high “potency.”

The messaging should include warnings of the highly variable content of fentanyl present in illicit products, which further elevates risk of overdose.<sup>5,6</sup>

3. Continue to encourage eligible recipients, including individuals at-risk for opioid-related overdose and family members and friends of those at-risk, to carry naloxone. Educate eligible recipients on the importance of activating EMS during an overdose event as the naloxone reversal effects may be temporary and overdose-related respiratory depression may return.
4. Encourage those who are at risk of an overdose to not use alone and preferably with others knowledgeable about the administration of naloxone and with a supply of naloxone on hand.

### **EMS and Law Enforcement**

1. Be aware of the potential for increased incidence of overdose in your community related to NPF and for the potential need for additional stocks of naloxone on hand.
2. Prioritize and expedite laboratory testing of drug samples taken from drug overdose scenes.
3. Continue to monitor individuals who have overdosed on fentanyl after receipts of bystander naloxone given the risk for recurrent respiratory depression once the temporary naloxone effect has ended.

### **Expanding Naloxone Access**

The State of Montana has issued a [Montana Standing Order for Naloxone Opioid Antagonists](#) that allows Montanans to access naloxone at no cost. Naloxone is a safe medication that can reverse a suspected opioid-related overdose.

Organizations and facilities may create a Memorandum of Understanding with the State of Montana that will allow them to:

- Order naloxone directly from the contracted pharmacy
- Distribute naloxone into the hands of those who are at risk of experiencing opioid-related drug overdose and to a family member, friend, or other person who can assist a person who is at risk of experiencing an opioid-related drug overdose
- Keep naloxone on hand for staff to administer as needed

Training on the administration of naloxone is also available at no cost.

To learn more about training and accessing free naloxone, visit [Naloxone.mt.gov](https://naloxone.mt.gov)

**Additional Information:** For more information regarding opioid issues in Montana, please refer to these resources:

#### [DPHHS Opioid Prevention Program](#)

<https://dphhs.mt.gov/opioid/index>

#### [Drug Poisoning Deaths in Montana, 2009-2020](#)

<https://dphhs.mt.gov/assets/publichealth/EMSTS/opioids/DrugPoisoningDeaths22.pdf>

#### [Montana Implementation Guide for Access to Naloxone Opioid Antagonists](#)

<https://dphhs.mt.gov/assets/publichealth/EMSTS/opioids/MontanaImplementationGuideforIncreasedNaloxoneUpdatedMay2019.pdf>

#### [Opioids Overdose Recognition and Response Guide \(Pamphlet\)](#)

<https://dphhs.mt.gov/assets/publichealth/EMSTS/opioids/Naloxonebrochure.pdf>

#### [Montana Standing Order for Naloxone Opioid Antagonists](#)

<https://dphhs.mt.gov/assets/publichealth/EMSTS/opioids/MontanaStandingOrderforNaloxoneOpioidAntagonists2022.pdf>

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2. U.S. Department of Justice, Drug Enforcement Administration, DEA Investigative Reporting, January 2015
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