

Quasi-legal drug 15 times stronger than heroin hides in plain sight

August 18 2014

Emergency physicians should expect "an upswing in what on the surface appear to be heroin overdoses," but are actually overdoses tied to acetyl fentanyl, an opiate that is mixed into street drugs marketed as heroin. The looming threat of another unregulated quasi-legal drug is detailed today online in *Annals of Emergency Medicine*.

"What's frightening about this emerging street [drug](#) is that users themselves may not be aware that they are ingesting it," said lead study author John Stogner, Ph.D. of the Department of Criminal Justice and Criminology at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte, N.C. "A patient may report [heroin](#) use and have symptoms consistent with heroin overdose, but an emergency physician may find that the standard dose of antidote (naloxone) doesn't work. Larger or additional doses are necessary when acetyl fentanyl is responsible. It's never good to lose time between overdose and treatment."

Acetyl fentanyl is an opiate analgesic with no recognized medical use. It is five to 15 times stronger than heroin. Users typically use it intravenously as a direct substitute for heroin or pharmaceutical-grade opioids, though many are unaware that what they are consuming is not plain heroin. A user who injects pure acetyl fentanyl may suffer severe consequences because of its extraordinary potency.

Acetyl fentanyl is not specifically regulated though it qualifies as an analogue of fentanyl (a medical opiate). Thus, it exists in a legal grey area in that it is considered illicit for human consumption but if a

package is labeled "not for [human consumption](#)" the product is technically legal. A large quantity of acetyl fentanyl would potentially be immune to regulation as long as it was titled, labeled and stored as a product with industrial or non-human research purposes.

"Clever and well-informed drug distribution networks will likely take advantage of the legal loophole and profit by replacing or cutting a highly-regulated drug with this less regulated one," said Dr. Stogner. "One of the many downsides of illegal drugs is you just can't trust your drug dealer. The trend of adulterants being worked into [street drugs](#) to make them more potent is dangerous. The significant potential for overdose of acetyl fentanyl necessitates more medical research and policy reform. "

More information: "The Potential Threat of Acetyl Fentanyl: Legal Issues, Contaminated Heroin, and Acetyl Fentanyl 'Disguised' as Other Opiates" [www.annemergmed.com/article/S0 ... \(14\)00624-6/fulltext](http://www.annemergmed.com/article/S0... (14)00624-6/fulltext)

Provided by American College of Emergency Physicians

Citation: Quasi-legal drug 15 times stronger than heroin hides in plain sight (2014, August 18) retrieved 5 May 2024 from

<https://medicalxpress.com/news/2014-08-quasi-legal-drug-stronger-heroin-plain.html>

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