

Overdose deaths from fentanyl soaring: report

March 21 2019, by Steven Reinberg, Healthday Reporter



(HealthDay)—The number of Americans dying from overdoses of the

powerful narcotic fentanyl rose 12-fold in recent years, health officials reported Thursday.

Fentanyl is a synthetic opioid that's hundreds of times more potent than heroin or cocaine. But sometimes drug users don't know they're buying it, because [fentanyl](#) is often mixed with other opioids or misrepresented as heroin.

"We saw the rates doubling each year from 2013 to 2016," said lead researcher Merianne Spencer, a statistician at the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's National Center for Health Statistics. "These are pretty astounding numbers in terms of the percentage increase per year."

The increases mirrored the entire opioid epidemic, which is claiming about 60,000 lives a year in the United States, she added.

In 2011 and 2012, about 1,600 deaths a year were attributed to fentanyl [overdose](#). Then, the toll began to rise, topping out at 18,000 in 2016, according to the report.

Less than one [death](#) in 100,000 was attributed to fentanyl overdose in 2011, compared to nearly six per 100,000 by 2016, the researchers found.

The toll rose for all ages, races and ethnicities—but increased faster for men than women. By 2016, men had almost three times the rate of fatal overdoses as women, Spencer said.

The biggest annual increases from 2011 through 2016 were among those aged 15 to 34. The rate for those aged 35 to 44 was stable until 2013, when fatal fentanyl overdoses rose an astonishing 124 percent a year.

Although whites accounted for most fentanyl overdose deaths, deaths among [black people](#) are increasing faster and catching up, Spencer noted.

For the study, her team used death certificate data that may actually underestimate the extent of the crisis.

Overdoses were counted only if fentanyl was listed as the cause of death, Spencer said. If the certificate simply said "[drug overdose](#)," it wasn't counted. Likewise, if fentanyl was misspelled, the death went uncounted.

As dramatic as overdose deaths were between 2011 and 2016, preliminary numbers for 2018 show that those caused by fentanyl continue to rise, Spencer said.

Carl Latkin is vice chairman of the department of health, behavior and society at Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health in Baltimore. He said, "On the one hand, these numbers are appalling. On the other, it's not surprising. Fentanyl is really a very nasty drug."

Latkin said it's more powerful and faster-acting than heroin, so an overdose is more likely. And when it occurs, it's going to happen more quickly, which is why it's so deadly.

He also noted that the drug landscape has changed. Fentanyl used to be mixed with other opioids, but what users today think is heroin may actually be 100 percent fentanyl.

"Most of the deaths are among people who think they are getting heroin," Latkin said. "But they're going to be dying from the fentanyl."

To reduce overdose deaths, Latkin would like to see wider distribution of naloxone (Narcan)—which can rapidly counteract an overdose—to

drug addicts and their families.

In addition, more access to addiction treatment is needed and the stigma against it must ease. Addiction needs to be seen as a medical condition, Latkin said.

The report was published March 21 in the CDC's *National Vital Statistics Reports*.

More information: To learn more about fentanyl, visit the [U.S. National Institute on Drug Abuse](#).

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