

County of Santa Clara

Public Health Department

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HEALTH ADVISORY: Opioid Overdoses

DATE: May 11, 2016

TO: Physicians, Physician Assistants, Nurse Practitioners, Hospitals, and Clinics

FROM: Sara H. Cody, MD
Health Officer and Public Health Director

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Prescription drug misuse and overdose is a national epidemic; prescription narcotics result in more fatal overdoses than heroin and cocaine combined. In recent years, there has been a dramatic increase in the acceptance and use of prescription opioids for the treatment of chronic, non-cancer pain, such as back pain or osteoarthritis, as well as an increase in opioid addiction, overdose, death, and black market demand. Counterfeit, look-alike prescription opioids are now emerging as a cause of overdose and death. The California Department of Public Health recently released a Drug Overdose Health Alert in response to a sharp increase in overdoses and deaths from counterfeit drugs that strongly resemble the prescription opioid Norco®, but are actually counterfeit pills containing fentanyl and other drugs that may not be detected by commercial toxicology tests.

In Santa Clara County, the age-adjusted rate for opioid-related deaths gradually rose from 4.2/100,000 in 2005 to 6.5/100,000 in 2015. Since July 2015, the Medical Examiner has reported 11 deaths from drug overdose related to fentanyl, including two in the past month with fatal levels of fentanyl combined with other opioids and illicit drugs. Some had a known history of buying prescription drugs off the street, including one person who bought counterfeit Vicodin®, and another, counterfeit Norco®. The emergence of illicitly produced fentanyl and fentanyl compounds are a new threat to public health and safety. Below are actions and resources to help clinicians prevent, identify, treat and alert us of any cases of opioid-related overdose or death.

Actions Requested of Healthcare Professionals:

Prevent, identify, treat, and report suspected opioid (including fentanyl) overdoses and deaths:

1. WARN patients with a history of substance abuse about the risks of purchasing street drugs or taking drugs from friends (i.e., not dispensed to the patient by a pharmacy) as they could be contaminated counterfeits.
2. TREAT with naloxone as clinically indicated for suspected overdose. Repeated doses (or naloxone infusion) may be needed to treat fentanyl overdose due to prolonged or recurrent respiratory depression (patients should be counseled about this and to seek medical assistance if naloxone is given in a community setting). Contact Poison Control at 1-800-222-1222 for assistance.
3. TEST for fentanyl when ordering drug screening on cases of suspected overdose.
4. REPORT suspected and confirmed opioid overdose cases to the Public Health Department. Fill out Confidential Morbidity Reporting form 110c (Go to: <https://www.sccgov.org/sites/sccphd/en-us/HealthProviders/DiseaseReporting/Pages/dsreport.aspx> to download forms) and send via confidential fax at (408) 885-3709. Include patient name, DOB, and address of residence.

Before prescribing opioids:

REMEMBER to check CURES 2.0 (Controlled Substance Utilization Review and Evaluation System), California's prescription drug monitoring program, to identify patients at risk of prescription drug misuse and overdose. REFER patients and families with substance misuse and abuse to Gateway (1-800-488-9919).

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.

Additional references and resources:

Drug Enforcement Administration. DEA issues nationwide alert on fentanyl as a threat to health and public safety, March 18, 2015. <http://www.dea.gov/divisions/hq/2015/hq031815.shtml>.

Vo KT, van Wijk XM, Lynch KL, Wu AH, Smollin CG. Counterfeit Norco Poisoning Outbreak — San Francisco Bay Area, California, March 25–April 5, 2016. MMWR Morb Mortal Wkly Rep 2016;65:420–423. <http://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/volumes/65/wr/mm6516e1.htm>

Dowell D, Haegerich TM, Chou R. CDC Guideline for Prescribing Opioids for Chronic Pain — United States, 2016. MMWR Recomm Rep 2016;65:1–49. <http://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/volumes/65/rr/rr6501e1.htm>