

Staying Safe Around Fentanyl: What First Responders and EMS Need to Know

What is fentanyl?

Fentanyl and its analogs (chemically similar compounds with similar effects) are highly potent synthetic opioids [1,2]. Legally manufactured fentanyl is an FDA-approved medication to treat severe pain and is highly regulated. Illegally manufactured fentanyl (often mixed with other substances and produced in unpredictable concentrations) is one of the main drivers of drug overdoses in New Mexico and nationally.

What are the signs of a fentanyl overdose?

Signs of fentanyl overdose are similar to other opioids. These include [1,3]:

- Falling asleep or loss of consciousness
- Small, constricted “pinpoint pupils”
- Discolored skin (especially in lips and nails)
- Slow, shallow, or absent breathing
- Choking or gurgling sounds

How does naloxone work and how do you use it?

Naloxone is a life-saving medication that can reverse an overdose from opioids including fentanyl, heroin, and prescription opioid medication. It can restore normal

breathing within 2-3 minutes. Because fentanyl is a more potent opioid, it may take longer for the naloxone to work, or a second dose may have to be administered [4].



Naloxone spray: Prefilled device that sprays naloxone into the nose.

Touching Pill or Powdered Fentanyl will not cause an overdose

Current scientific evidence shows that simply touching fentanyl in pill or powder form (how it is found frequently in illicit supplies) will **not** cause an overdose [1]. If you accidentally come into contact with powdered fentanyl, wash hands or affected area with soap and water even if gloves were worn [5].

Fentanyl Exposure and First Responders

Scientific evidence shows that the risk of serious health effects from fentanyl exposure is extremely low for emergency responders [6].

Fentanyl Exposures: How do I protect myself?

CDC/NIOSH recommends the following [5] to help prevent emergency responders' exposure to fentanyl:

- **Gloves:** For routine handling of these drugs, nitrile gloves [7] are recommended to provide sufficient skin protection.
- **Respiratory Protection:** Wear respiratory protection if powdered drugs are visible or suspected. Fentanyl in powder form, if blown into the air, will settle fast. In rare cases if drug particles or droplets remain airborne, an N95 respirator [7] provides sufficient protection.
- **Responders who may encounter fentanyl should:**
 - Know the signs of opioid intoxication.
 - Have naloxone available and trained to use it with active medical assistance.
 - Give naloxone if someone shows clear signs of slowed breathing or decreased consciousness.
- **Because these situations can be extremely stressful, first responders may experience anxiety or panic symptoms that can mimic signs of exposure**

Reducing Illicit Drug* Exposure: Safety Measures for First Responders

WHEN YOU SUSPECT ILLICIT DRUGS ARE PRESENT:

DO

wear your personal protective equipment.



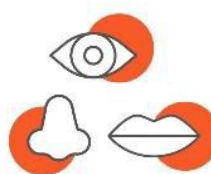
DO

wash your hands with soap and water.



DO NOT

touch your eyes, nose, and mouth.



DO NOT

use hand sanitizer, eat, drink, smoke, or use the bathroom.



Centers for Disease Control and Prevention
National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health

*Illicit drug products include but are not limited to opioids, cocaine, cannabinoids, methamphetamines, heroin, and cathinones. Learn more at: cdc.gov/niosh/topics/fentanyl/risk

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Resources and References

- 1. New Mexico Department of Health. Harm Reduction Fentanyl FAQ**
<https://www.nmharmreduction.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/02/Fentanyl-FAQ.pdf>
Summary: NM Department of Health FAQs one page sheet on Fentanyl.
- 2. National Institute on Drug Abuse. Fentanyl.**
<https://nida.nih.gov/research-topics/fentanyl/>
Summary: Highlights information about fentanyl, how does make people feel, and the health risks of taking fentanyl.
- 3. New Mexico Department of Health Fentanyl Facts**
<https://www.nmhealth.org/about/erd/ibeb/pos/awnm/ff/>
Summary: NM Department of Health guidance, FAQs, resources and information on Fentanyl.
- 4. CDC. Lifesaving Naloxone.**
<https://www.cdc.gov/stop-overdose/caring/naloxone.html>
Summary: Naloxone is a safe medication that can reverse an overdose from opioids, including heroin and fentanyl. This CDC resource has information about where to get naloxone and how to use it.
- 5. Fentanyl: Emergency Responders at Risk**
<https://www.cdc.gov/niosh/topics/fentanyl/risk.htm>
Summary: Practical, evidence-based resource from CDC/NIOSH outlining how to prevent exposures and respond safely during fentanyl exposure incidents.
- 6. ACMT and AACT Position Statement: Preventing Occupational Fentanyl and Fentanyl Analog Exposure to Emergency Responders.**
<https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC5711758/>
Summary: Review of current scientific evidence showing that the risk of clinically significant fentanyl exposures to first responders is extremely low. This includes:
 - Fentanyl cannot be absorbed through the skin fast enough to cause an overdose, even in powdered form.
 - Powdered fentanyl does not stay airborne easily, making inhalation during routine encounters very unlikely.
 - No confirmed cases show first responders overdosing from incidental exposure; reported symptoms are typically related to stress or panic, not opioid toxicity.
- 7. National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH) Fentanyl: Emergency Responders Toolkit**
<https://www.cdc.gov/niosh/substance-use/fentanyl-toolkit-emergency-responders/index.html>
Summary: CDC/NIOSH educational guidance on preventing occupational exposure to fentanyl provides clear, evidence-based recommendations to keep first responders safe. It explains that incidental skin contact is not expected to cause harmful effects and offers practical steps like routine handwashing to reduce contamination risk. Includes helpful educational materials to support responder training.
- 8. New Mexico Department of Health Occupational Health Surveillance Program**
<https://www.nmhealth.org/about/erd/eheb/ohsp/>
Summary: This resource explains New Mexico's requirement for healthcare providers to report work-related injuries or illnesses within 24 hours and provides required forms and contacts.