



Sioux Lookout
First Nations
Health Authority

COMMUNITY WELLBEING ADVISORY

To: Sioux Lookout area Chiefs and Health Directors
From: Dr. Lloyd Douglas, Public Health Physician
Date: December 9, 2024
Re: **Fentanyl Detection in Community**

Issue:

The Sioux Lookout First Nations Health Authority (SLFNHA) has received a report through our Overdose and Fentanyl Exposure Monitoring System of fentanyl being detected in one of our communities during this past week. Fentanyl is a common cause of overdose-related deaths in Canada, and First Nations communities are disproportionately affected by this crisis due to historical and ongoing colonial practices. A report prepared by the Chiefs of Ontario (COO) and Ontario Drug Policy Research Network (ODPRN) indicates that in 2021, the rate of opioid-related deaths among First Nations Peoples was more than seven times higher than the non-Indigenous population in Ontario with nearly 90% of deaths caused by fentanyl. Additionally, the Anishininiwug Ajimoowin Animisewiinan Mental Health and Substance Use Report published by SLFNHA in June 2024 identified substance use disorder as the most common diagnosis in the mental health and substance use category in the Sioux Lookout area First Nations communities. Furthermore, the unnatural death rate in this area was 3.2 times higher than the provincial average, with 13.1% of incidents linked to substance use related causes. Given this regional context, this Community Wellbeing Advisory provides the latest information about fentanyl and offers recommendations to reduce the risk of opioid overdoses in the Sioux Lookout area First Nations communities.

What is the Overdose and Fentanyl Exposure Monitoring System?

This system was launched by SLFNHA in collaboration with the Meno Ya Win Health Centre and Indigenous Services Canada with the goal of ensuring timely and accurate monitoring of overdoses and fentanyl exposures to mitigate the impact of toxic drug supplies in communities. This system is monitored daily, and the Harm Reduction program within SLFNHA's Approaches to Community Wellbeing department coordinates subsequent public health responses.

Healthcare providers should report all opioid overdoses and positive fentanyl tests to this system. Clients using fentanyl drug test strips also have the option to anonymously report positive fentanyl tests to this system. This will help us detect toxic drug trends early, improve our emergency response, and enhance planning to provide better, more comprehensive substance use care in communities.

What is Fentanyl?

Fentanyl is a synthetic opioid that is up to 50 times stronger than heroin and 100 times stronger than morphine. Due to its potency, fentanyl is often added to other unregulated drugs to increase their strength, make them cheaper, more addictive, and therefore more dangerous. Drug dealers who make fake pills may not know or control how much fentanyl is included in each pill. Additionally, drugs can accidentally become contaminated with fentanyl when drug dealers re-use surfaces and equipment that have previously been used for fentanyl. Fentanyl is odourless and tasteless, and people are often not aware of having ingested fentanyl. A few grains of fentanyl are enough to cause a fatality.

Effects of Fentanyl:

Fentanyl can cause dizziness, confusion, “nodding off” (being in and out of consciousness), drowsiness, slow breathing, nausea and vomiting, small pupils, itching, or a warm sensation on the skin. Life threatening effects can occur within two minutes of use.

Signs of Overdose:

Opioids affect the part of our brain that controls breathing. When more opioids are taken than the body can handle (overdose), breathing can slow down, leading to unconsciousness and even death. The signs of a fentanyl overdose are the same as those of other opioids and include:

- Unresponsiveness
- Slow, shallow breathing, or complete cessation of breathing (respiratory arrest)
- Gargling sounds or snoring
- Cold, clammy, or bluish skin, especially in the lips and nails
- Severe sleepiness or loss of consciousness.

Who is at the Most Risk of an Opioid Overdose?

Anyone using prescribed or street opioids can experience an overdose. Risk of overdose is increased if:

- Prescription opioids are taken more often or at higher doses than recommended.
- Opioids are taken in combination with alcohol or other sedatives like sleeping pills, muscle relaxants, and benzodiazepines.
- Drugs are injected.
- Switching to a stronger drug, or one that the body is not used to ingesting.
- Taking higher doses than one is used to.
- Using drugs of unknown purity and strength.
- Having other health conditions like liver or kidney disease, or breathing problems.
- Opioids were stopped and recently restarted.

Recommendations:

- Nursing station staff should ensure that opioid overdoses, as well as positive fentanyl tests are reported to SLFNHA through the Opioid Overdose and Fentanyl Exposure Monitoring System. Each nursing station should have a QR code directing individuals to this reporting system.
- SLFNHA is now providing fentanyl drug test strips to all communities, free of cost. Leadership can sign their community on to receive these strips, which individuals who use substances can utilize to test their samples for the presence of fentanyl. If drug test strips are available in your nursing stations, please use these to test your supply for fentanyl. Positive fentanyl tests obtained by individuals can also be anonymously reported to the Opioid Overdose and Fentanyl Exposure Monitoring System using a QR code found in the fentanyl drug test kit.
- If you do use opioids or drugs that may be contaminated with fentanyl:
 - Do not use alone.
 - Avoid injecting, as it significantly increases the risk of experiencing an overdose.
 - Start with a small amount to test the strength of the substance.
 - Do not mix opioids with alcohol or other drugs.
 - Have naloxone on hand, and ensure you know how to use it.
- Check with your nursing station to determine the harm reduction services that are available in your community including:
 - Needle Distribution Services: which will provide new needles and safer substance use supplies.
 - Opioid Overdose Prevention Services: which include provision of naloxone and fentanyl drug test strips.
- If an overdose is suspected:
 - Give naloxone, a medicine that can temporarily reverse the effects of an opioid overdose.
 - Give the person another dose of naloxone if signs and symptoms do not disappear after five minutes or if they reappear.
 - Call the nursing station or other emergency services and stay until emergency services arrive. The effects of naloxone wear off after 20-90 minutes, so it is essential that the individual receives further medical attention.
- Use free and confidential harm reduction services provided in your communities to reduce the health and social harms associated with substance use.
- Seek free and confidential professional help and resources for substance use through the following phone lines:
 - 1-877-254-3348
 - 1-844-NAN-HOPE (text or phone toll-free).

SLFNHA is continuing to monitor this situation to protect the health of the community members we serve. We thank all community workers, healthcare providers, and community members for their support in improving the health of our people in the Sioux Lookout area First Nations communities.

If you have any questions, please contact:

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