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PRESS RELEASE

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OPIOID ADDICTION: THE BATTLE RAGES ON
Across the nation, newspaper headlines and television news stories continue to be filled with reports of illicit drug use.

Nebraska is among the states working to combat the presence of illicit drugs and resulting damages to users. In 2020, the Nebraska Legislature passed LB1124, the Opioid Prevention and Treatment Act “to provide for the use of dedicated revenue for opioid-disorder-related treatment and prevention.”

The Act establishes the Nebraska Opioid Recovery Fund which will receive settlement funds from “various defendant corporations related to the opioid epidemic” over a five-year period. Funds distributed to cities and counties “must be used in a manner approved under the settlement agreement for abatement of opioid use disorder and any co-occurring mental health or substance use disorders.”

Dr. Tina (Christine) Chasek, LIMHP, LADC, LPC, University of Nebraska Medical Center at the University of Nebraska Omaha, says officials believe current statistics don’t show the true extent of opioid-related deaths in the state

“We know some deaths caused by these drugs have been reported as the result of some other condition,” says. “Some Sarpy County officials are investigating data in order to obtain better statistics about opioid and fentanyl related deaths.”

According to provisional cause-of-death data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, at least 256 Nebraskans died from poisonings and overdoses on fentanyl and other synthetic opioids. The data reveals that 138 of those deaths occurred in 2021 and 2022. Ages of the victims ranged from teenagers to the elderly as well as those who were well-to-do and those living in poverty.

According to local newspaper reports, officials involved in responding to drug-related emergencies see no clear demographic for those using and dying from the drugs.

“Fentanyl is the most significant issue right now,” Chasek says. “Part of the issue is that fentanyl is being mixed with oxycodone and other black market pills, which is affecting the number of overdoses and deaths.”

The National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIDA) documents that “Fentanyl is a powerful synthetic opioid that is similar to morphine but is 50 to 100 times more potent.” Fentanyl is a prescription drug that is made and used illegally.”

Like morphine, fentanyl is used to treat patients with severe pain, especially following a surgery. It may also be used to treat those with chronic pain or who are physically intolerant of other opioids.

NIDA notes that “synthetic opioids, including fentanyl, are now the most common drugs involved in drug overdose deaths in the United States. In 2017, 59.8% of opioid-related deaths involved fentanyl compared to 14.3% in 2010.”

In September 2022 it was reported that, according to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), fentanyl was the top cause of death among U.S. adults ages 18-45. At that time, fentanyl was reported to be responsible for at least

70% of all drug deaths. The CDC found that fentanyl deaths increased from 37,208 in 2020 to 41,587 in 2021 – a nearly 12% increase over a one-year period.

Illegally distributed fentanyl is sold as a powder, dropped onto blotter paper, put in eye droppers and nasal sprays, or made into pills that look like other prescription opioids. Some drug dealers mix fentanyl with drugs such as heroin, cocaine, methamphetamine, and MDMA. A very small amount of fentanyl produces a strong high, which makes it a cheaper option.

According to NIDA, “fentanyl works by binding to the body’s opioid receptors, which are found in areas of the brain that control pain and emotions. After taking opioids many times, the brain adapts to the drug, diminishing its sensitivity, making it hard to feel pleasure from anything besides the drug.”

When someone overdoses on fentanyl, their breathing can slow or stop, decreasing the amount of oxygen reaching the brain, causing a condition called hypoxia. This condition can lead to coma and permanent brain damage, even death.

“There are heartbreaking stories of these kinds of deaths in Nebraska,” Chasek says. “A young mom who was just ready to start a new job takes ‘medication’ bought off the streets and her four-year-old who accidentally ingested a pill and didn’t make it (later shown to contain fentanyl and norfentanyl). The strong reaction to these illicit pills is so immediate and so strong it shuts down the respiratory system.”

Since drug dealers often mix fentanyl with other drugs such as heroin or cocaine, officials may find it difficult to know which drug led to overdose. “Naloxone is a medicine that can treat a fentanyl overdose when given right away,” NIDA documents. “It works by rapidly binding to opioid receptors and blocking the effects of opioid drugs. But fentanyl is stronger than other opioid drugs like morphine and might require multiple doses of naloxone.

“Naloxone is available as an injectable (needle) solution and nasal sprays such as NARCAN and KLOXXADO.”

Because it’s so potent, fentanyl is addictive. Those using prescription fentanyl are susceptible to dependence, which doesn’t always but may lead to addiction.

“In Summer 2022, local officials reported that they took 150,000 illegal pills of the streets,” Chasek says. “That’s approximately an 83% increase over 2021. Many people don’t realize they’re taking fentanyl and those who make the drug don’t care who takes it or if they die.”

Treatment for opioid addiction is available and it works. Authorities urge those using fentanyl or family members and friends of fentanyl users to seek treatment because such a small amount of this drug can be deadly.

For treatment information, contact SAMHSA’s national hotline at 1-800-662-HELP(4357). Find additional information at this link:
<https://www.samhsa.gov/find-help/national-helpline>.

Find more details at
<https://nida.nih.gov/publications/drugfacts/fentanyl>
or on the Drug Enforcement Administration website at
<https://www.dea.gov/resources/facts-about-fentanyl>

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