Cocaine and fentanyl: Overdose prevention and public health messaging

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Outline

• Data that shaped our messaging around cocaine & fentanyl
  – Overdose mortality data
  – NYPD laboratory data
• Overview of DOHMH’s cocaine-focused overdose prevention work
• Recent press
• Discussion: Public health messaging on cocaine & fentanyl
Increase in cocaine-involved overdose deaths driven by opioids

Age-adjusted rate of unintentional drug poisoning death, by selected substances involved, New York City, 2010 – 2019

[Graph showing the increase in cocaine-involved overdose deaths driven by opioids from 2010 to 2019]

Other substances may be present unless otherwise specified.

Source: New York City Office of the Chief Medical Examiner & New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene 2010-2019*
*Data for 2019 are preliminary and subject to change.
Increase in cocaine-involved overdose deaths driven by opioids, particularly fentanyl

Age-adjusted rate of unintentional drug poisoning death, by selected substances involved, New York City, 2010 – 2019

Other substances may be present unless otherwise specified.

Source: New York City Office of the Chief Medical Examiner & New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene 2010-2019*

*Data for 2019 are preliminary and subject to change.
• Over a period of less than three hours, nine patients from five discrete locations were brought to two emergency departments
• All patients denied prior illicit opioid use
• All patients reported sniffing cocaine prior to ED presentation
• All eight patients who provided blood or urine specimens tested positive for cocaine metabolites and had quantifiable fentanyl concentrations
• All patients survived
Fentanyl in cocaine supply poses three challenges for public health

1. People who use cocaine only are disproportionately susceptible to the risks associated with fentanyl.  
   - Lack opioid tolerance, high risk of overdose

2. People who use only cocaine may not previously have been a focus for opioid-focused prevention interventions but should be.  
   - May not interact with or attend syringe service programs (SSPs) or drug treatment

3. People who use only cocaine intermittently may not be reached by any drug-focused prevention strategies or messages.  
   - People who use cocaine intermittently may not self-identify as a “person who uses drugs”, cocaine dependence may be less pronounced, may not interact with any services that specifically focus on people who use drugs.
COCAIN-FOCUSED WORK
Cocaine and fentanyl awareness initiative 2018 & 2019

- Neighborhoods with a high density of bars, nightclubs, and music venues
- Pilot in bars and nightclubs on the Lower East Side
  - May - June 2018
  - Venues asked to display an educational poster and use coasters
    - Overdose prevention training and naloxone offered to bar staff
- Williamsburg
  - June - August 2019
  - Similar to 2018 pilot
  - Press event and social media engaged to help disseminate messaging
Enhanced community engagement
2018-2020

• Initiative focused on:
  – South Bronx
  – Washington Heights
  – Central and East Harlem

• Rapid Assessment and Response (RAR) team made in-person visits to bodegas/delis, laundromats, liquor stores, check-cashing establishments, barber shops and beauty salons

• Provided fentanyl awareness materials, overdose prevention training and naloxone
**Materials used for community engagement**

**WHAT IS FENTANYL?**

- Fentanyl is a fast-acting synthetic opioid that is 30 to 50 times stronger than heroin.
- Carry naloxone. Naloxone can reverse an overdose from heroin and other opioids, including fentanyl.

Pharmaceutical fentanyl is prescribed for severe pain and end-of-life care. Non-pharmaceutical fentanyl is produced illegally and has been found in cocaine, heroin, ketamine and methamphetamine supplies in New York City. It has also been found in counterfeit benzodiazepines (such as Xanax or Klonopin) and opioid painkillers (such as OxyContin or Vicodin) bought on the street and online. Fentanyl cannot be identified by sight, taste or smell.

**TIPS FOR SAFER USE OF COCAINE AND CRACK**

- Prevent opioid overdoses:
  - Carry naloxone. Naloxone can reverse an opioid overdose.
  - Avoid mixing drugs. Mixing opioids with alcohol and other drugs increases the risk of overdose.
  - Avoid using alone. If you do, have someone check on you.

**USING COCAINE?**

**YOU SHOULD KNOW ABOUT FENTANYL**

Fentanyl, a drug stronger than heroin, has been identified in cocaine and is causing a spike in drug overdose deaths.

To find naloxone, call 311 or get the STOP OD NYC app. For treatment help, call 888-NYC-WELL.
Materials available in languages other than English
Additional cocaine-focused initiatives

• Funding fentanyl test strips (2018-2021)
  – Funding syringe service programs to purchase and distribute test strips
  – Upcoming pilot program to provide fentanyl test strips to more organizations, with aim of increasing access and reaching people who use cocaine

• Cocaine detailing to primary care providers (2020)
  – Improve how clinicians talk with people about substance use. Cardiovascular health, cocaine & fentanyl, naloxone and other harm reduction strategies.

• Community ambassador initiative (2021)
  – Supporting community ambassadors to deliver naloxone and fentanyl education messaging to members of the community in high priority neighborhoods
MESSAGING ON COCAINE & FENTANYL
Timeline of DOHMH messaging around cocaine and fentanyl

February
HAN first warned of
regional fentanyl-associated overdoses

April
HAN indicated increased presence of fentanyl in NYC

October
HAN warned that fentanyl was present in nearly half of overdose deaths

June
HAN warned that people who use cocaine are at particularly high risk of overdose due to fentanyl

May
Letter to Syringe Service Programs: “In April 2021, 8% of the cocaine products tested by the NYPD laboratory contained fentanyl.”

New Year’s Eve press releases noted increased presence of fentanyl in drug supply. Mentioned fentanyl in cocaine, although infrequently.

Notes: DOHMH= New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene; HAN= Health Alert Network.
Our messaging differentiates between two risks

Risk of exposure to fentanyl when using drugs

Risk of overdose

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\begin{align*}
P(\text{Overdose}|\text{fentanyl exposure & opioid naive}) \\
P(\text{Overdose}|\text{fentanyl exposure & opioid tolerant}) \\
P(\text{Overdose}|\text{no fentanyl exposure})
\end{align*}
\]
Health Department Reminds New Yorkers Who Use Alcohol or Drugs this Holiday to Stay Safe, December 31, 2019

“Although fentanyl is present in a small proportion of the cocaine supply in New York City, people should know if they use drugs containing fentanyl, they are at increased risk for overdose,” said Senior Director of Research and Surveillance Dr. Denise Paone.

If You’re Partying Again In NYC, Be Wary Of Fentanyl-Laced Cocaine

“For someone who’s opioid-naive, a really small amount of fentanyl, given its potency, really does carry a higher overdose risk,” said Michelle Nolan, an epidemiologist at the city Health Department.”
RECENT PRESS ON COCAINE & FENTANYL
Discussion

• How best to inform people about the risk posed by fentanyl in non-opioid drugs?

• What other strategies can prevent overdose death among people who use cocaine?