

# Preventing Overdose Deaths With Drug Checking



**Drug checking kits are a low cost method to detect fentanyl and avoid overdose. Starting on June 01, 2018 drug checking kits will no longer be considered drug paraphernalia and are LEGAL in Maryland. Legal drug checking kits will prevent overdoses and save lives.**

Drug checking is a harm reduction service that helps to reduce the chance of ingesting dangerous adulterants, including those that cause overdose. There are different types of drug checking kits, such as reagent kits and fentanyl testing strips. Drug checking saves lives and allows public health officials to track deadly trends in the drug supply.

Fentanyl is a synthetic opioid far more potent than heroin or morphine, and lethal at much lower doses. Fentanyl or its analogs are often added to heroin or other drugs high in the supply chain; many drug users are not aware that fentanyl has been added.

Due to these factors, deaths involving fentanyl are rapidly increasing in Maryland. Between 2015 and 2016 fentanyl-related deaths **more than tripled (from 340 to 1119)**. **Fifty-eight percent** of heroin-related deaths in 2016 occurred in combination with fentanyl.<sup>1</sup>

A recent pilot program in Vancouver showed drug checking prevents fentanyl overdoses. **Of drugs checked, 79% contained fentanyl. Those who checked drugs prior to use were 10 times more likely to reduce their dose and were 25% less likely to overdose.**<sup>2</sup>

Drug checking with fentanyl testing strips is simple, quick and low cost (as low as \$1). Water is added to a miniscule amount of substance, the testing strip is dipped in, and a positive or negative for fentanyl is revealed in minutes.

Drug checking kits are an increasingly popular life-saving harm reduction measure, but until recently Maryland's paraphernalia laws made them illegal and they were not widely used. Under previous law, drug checking kits were considered drug paraphernalia.<sup>3</sup> In 2018 Maryland lawmakers acted to legalize fentanyl testing strips and drug checking kits by removing materials that "test" or "analyze" drugs from the definition of paraphernalia.<sup>4</sup>

**Fentanyl testing strips and other forms of drug checking kits are now legal in Maryland.** Syringe access programs and other harm reduction organizations plan to distribute such kits to those most at risk in order to prevent overdose deaths. Rapid Response Test Strips are pictured below:



<sup>1</sup> Maryland Dept. of Health and Mental Hygiene, *Drug- and Alcohol-Related Intoxication Deaths in Maryland, 2016* (Baltimore, June 2017), available at [https://bha.health.maryland.gov/OVERDOSE\\_PREVENTION/Documents/Maryland%202016%20Overdose%20Annual%20report.pdf](https://bha.health.maryland.gov/OVERDOSE_PREVENTION/Documents/Maryland%202016%20Overdose%20Annual%20report.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> Vancouver Coastal Health. News release: Drug checking at Insite shows potential for preventing fentanyl-related overdoses. May 2017. Find at: <http://www.vch.ca/about-us/news/news-releases/drug-checking-at-insite-shows-potential-for-preventing-fentanyl-related-overdoses>

<sup>3</sup> Maryland Code §5-619.

<sup>4</sup> Senate Bill 1137 (Chapter 145), approved by the Governor April 24, 2018, available at: [http://mgaleg.maryland.gov/2018RS/chapters\\_noln/Ch\\_145\\_sb1137E.pdf](http://mgaleg.maryland.gov/2018RS/chapters_noln/Ch_145_sb1137E.pdf).