



## Fentanyl's Effect on Brain & Lungs

Synthetic fentanyl is sold illegally in the form of pills, powder, eye drops, nasal spray, and on blotter paper.

When fentanyl enters the human body, it binds to opioid receptors in the brain. Opioid receptors control pain and emotions.

Because fentanyl is a central nervous system (CNS) depressant, the drug blocks the brain from sending signals to vital organs telling them how to function properly. When the lungs are not being told by the brain to expand and contract the way they should, respiratory function fails, and the body does not get the oxygen it needs. Without oxygen, the brain can no longer function, and consciousness is lost in only a few seconds. After several minutes of being deprived of oxygen, brain damage and death can occur.

## Opioid Use Disorder

Other opioid drugs like morphine, heroin, oxycodone, hydrocodone, codeine, and hydromorphone when taken in overdose amounts (or in combination with alcohol or other

drugs) can have the same effect as fentanyl on the brain and lungs. Individuals who suffer from an opioid use disorder (OUD) are at much greater risk of suffering from an opioid overdose.

The National Institutes of Health (NIH) defines Opioid Use Disorder as: "A complex illness characterized by compulsive use of opioid drugs even when the person wants to stop, or when using the drugs negatively affects the person's physical and emotional well-being."

People with opioid use disorder have a pattern of opioid use that leads to significant problems, such as health problems and difficulty meeting major responsibilities at home, work, or school. OUD can involve the use of illegal opioids, like synthetic fentanyl, or prescription opioids like oxycodone.

## Getting Help from Family Doctors

The Centers for Disease Control (CDC) reports that there were an estimated 107,543 drug overdose deaths in the United States during 2023.

Because of the opioid crisis in America, over time, people have been moving to even more dangerous forms of opioid use.

Individuals with OUD are in need of professional help to deal with their addiction and avoid overdose death. But many people don't realize that help is available from their family doctor or primary care physician (PCP).

The three drugs most often prescribed to treat OUD are buprenorphine, methadone, and naltrexone and all three of these treatments have been demonstrated to be safe and effective. Family doctors can prescribe the appropriate medication to treat OUD, but most people don't know to seek help from their PCP.

According to a survey published in the Journal of American Medicine, six out of ten Americans said they were not aware that primary care providers can prescribe treatment for OUD, and more than 13% incorrectly believed they could not.

There are almost 210,000 primary care physicians in the U.S. who could play a big role in expanding access to OUD treatment if people would just ask for their help.

Family doctors are in a unique position to help patients with OUD because they often care for the whole family, and it is always a family effort to keep someone in sobriety. People have a much better chance of succeeding if they have family support.

Family doctors are also in the best position to notice when an individual begins to show signs of a substance use disorder because they often have an established long-term relationship with their patients.

People usually trust their family doctor or PCP and are more likely to feel comfortable enough with them to share their substance use concerns.

Once a PCP and patient have had a conversation about substance use and have determined that it would be best to seek treatment, the primary care setting can be a great place for that treatment to occur. Some patients feel more comfortable when their substance use disorder is treated in the same way as any other medical condition, which can also reduce the stigma.

Most family doctors and PCPs view substance use disorder as just another chronic medical problem like high blood pressure and diabetes. Addiction is something that these doctors can help their patients deal with and achieve very positive results.

By getting help from a family doctor or PCP, people whose lives are spinning out of control can get things under control, get back to work, and repair their relationships.



It's a beautiful day  
to be sober!

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# Supervisor Newsletter

Last month's *Supervisor Training Newsletter* addressed the need for more focus on employee substance use problems. This month, we will discuss how supervisors should respond when an employee voluntarily reports that he or she is struggling with substance use issues.

## Action Steps

Before any conversation about substance use/abuse, it can be very helpful to be prepared with the necessary knowledge and steps to provide assistance. Setting the stage for a helpful conversation should involve these actions:

- Know your company's policies around substance use and be ready to clearly communicate the policies to your employee.
- Think through what you're going to say and what resources you want to share with them.
- If you have specific concerns about the employee's work performance, be prepared to share those in a caring, compassionate way.

- Arrange to meet in a quiet area where you can talk in private and ask another supervisor or human resources representative to join you. If your employee is part of a union, ask a union representative to join as well.
- Be careful to speak in a calm, nonjudgmental tone.
- Keep in mind that employees who are dealing with substance use may also be dealing with other sensitive issues, like losing a loved one. Give them time to explain what's going on.
- During the conversation, be positive whenever possible and point out some of the employee's strengths.
- Ask how the company can support the employee in seeking help for the problem(s) he or she is facing.

## Talking Points

When an employee tells you that they're using substances, it is most important to offer reassurance and support, then bring up the next steps. Here are some examples of acceptable dialogue:

- "I know this isn't easy, but we are here to support you. We want to give you the resources you need to succeed."

- "Do you have any next steps in mind, or would you like me to help you find some treatment options? What can I do to make this process easier?"
- "It sounds like you're interested in getting help for your substance use. I'm so glad to hear that. Here are some ways the company can support you."

Keep in mind the importance of managing your emotions during any conversation involving substance use. Supervisors should always keep control of their emotions in case the employee loses control of theirs. For example, when people cry at work over personal issues, you may exhibit empathy, but you do not need to become "one" with it and join in the emotion.

Be careful to not promise complete confidentiality. You can't keep that promise. You can commit to share the information on a need-to-know basis but let them know you must use your discretion as a supervisor. This covers you in case the matter falls into a "serious" category, for example, if an employee mentions suicide, you might need to notify the appropriate authorities.

### **Provide Help and Resources**

Let your employee know about any resources or company policies that

may be helpful as they pursue treatment.

- If your company offers an Employee Assistance Program (EAP), let your employee know that they can access free, confidential counseling sessions and treatment referrals through the EAP.
- Be sure to inform the employee of any company policies or state or federal laws that may be applicable to them.
- If your company offers health insurance, explain what services are covered under your plan and how to find a treatment provider that's "in network."
- Be sure to share contact information for your health insurance company, EAP, and other helpful benefits, so your employee won't have to dig for the details.
- If your employee shares that they have already started treatment for substance use, ask how you can support them during treatment.

Keep in mind that this initial conversation is just the beginning. Talking about substance use and recovery should be an ongoing dialogue. The goal is to partner with your employees and give them the tools and support they need to be successful.