PREMIUM ADVERTISMENT

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Opioid Drug Overdoses in California

Over the past 3 weeks, there have been at least 48 overdoses of illicitly obtained drugs and at least 10 deaths in California. It is suspected these overdoses were the result of consumption of an opioid drug that strongly resembles the prescription drug Norco, but actually contained an undetermined amount of fentanyl.

While purchasing “street Norco”, or Norco pain pills sold illegally, is a known problem in California, analysis of pills associated with this new cluster of overdoses shows these are not simply Norco. The pills have been laced with fentanyl. In some cases, the pills were pure fentanyl. This is a very dangerous situation because fentanyl does not come in pill form, and is a much more potent drug than Norco. Individuals who purchase “street Norco” may actually be getting fentanyl and the dose could be fatal. Physicians and community members need to be on alert for fentanyl overdoses in situations where a person ingested Norco not obtained from a pharmacy.

Fentanyl is a powerful synthetic pain medication similar to but more potent than morphine. It is typically prescribed by physicians to treat patients with severe pain, or to manage pain after surgery. Fentanyl can also be produced in clandestine laboratories and sold on the street as alternative drugs. In its prescription form, fentanyl is known as Actiq, Duragesic, and Sublimaze. Street names for the drug include Apache, China girl, China white, dance fever, friend, goodfella, jackpot, murder 8, TNT, as well as Tango and Cash.

The recent cluster of overdoses has impacted people of all ages, genders and neighborhoods. There were a number of cases in the Sacramento area, but in other California counties as well.

The Santa Barbara County Departments of Public Health and Behavioral Wellness are joining with the California Department of Public Health to:

- Educate and warn individuals with a history of substance abuse about the risks of purchasing street drugs at this time. Fentanyl is colorless and odorless and cannot be readily detected with laboratory analysis.
- Provide specific overdose (OD) prevention and reversal information and training throughout the county.
- Distribute Naloxone (Narcan), an opioid antidote, to targeted agencies and individuals to reverse opioid OD, including Fentanyl overdoses.
- Include overdose prevention and reversal policies and procedures in all Community Based Organization (CBO) contracts.
- Direct healthcare providers to test for fentanyl when ordering drug screening on cases of suspected overdose.

To better understand the magnitude of the severe outcomes due to the use of illicitly obtained fentanyl, in California, healthcare facilities and providers will be monitoring potential fentanyl overdose cases closely.

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