

The Dallas Morning News

Fentanyl is in “every corner”; Families grieve losing loved ones to illicit synthetic drug

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November 17, 2022

Health and law enforcement officials have an urgent message: Fentanyl is not a recreational drug and can kill people who try it for the first time or leave users hooked in a downward spiral of addiction.

“This is not a drug to experiment with,” said Eduardo Chávez, special agent in charge of the Drug Enforcement and Administration (DEA) in Dallas. “Just two milligrams of fentanyl... can cause fatal poisoning.”

Fentanyl is a highly controlled synthetic opioid used to treat severe pain in patients with advanced stages of cancer or after surgery. It is up to 100 times more potent than morphine, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). The drug is 50 times stronger than heroin.

But it’s also becoming a widely trafficked illicit drug and dealers target youth and other low-level users of recreational substances. This illicit drug has shown up in north Texas alarming authorities.

“Let me be clear: Fake fentanyl-containing pills and (fentanyl) trafficking organizations have been identified in every corner of North Texas and Oklahoma,” Chávez said Thursday during the 2022 DEA Family Summit in Coppell. “It’s here.”

The toll is alarming and rising: 71,238 people died in the United States from a fentanyl overdose in 2021, a spike of 23% compared to 2020.

That number is rising this year, with many of the victims from north Texas.

Many of the fatal victims are people who aren’t even looking to use recreational drugs.

That’s the case of Sebastián Moreno, 24, a Fort Worth resident who in February took just half of a pill that he assumed was a painkiller but it turned out to be fentanyl.

“My son had pain in his waist and his back because he fell trying to clear the snow and ice from the house,” said his mother Ofie Moreno, holding a photo of his son. “A friend from work offered him a pain pill and my son didn’t wake up anymore.”

The family found half of a pill next to his bed. The medical examiner’s report determined it was fentanyl.

“It was a very big surprise because we did not know where that drug had come from,” said Francisco Moreno, Sebastián’s father. “Our family has completely changed and we are suffering.”

The DEA is still investigating the case.

Special Agent Chávez said the agency has opened investigations on more than two dozen cases related to the distribution of fentanyl. More than 1.3 million counterfeit pills have been seized.

He said the most common form is as fake pills, which look like regulated medicinal pills, but they can also be trafficked as powder or liquid forms. Smugglers hide and disguise these illicit pills that even trained DEA agents can’t tell if those pills are real or fake, containing fentanyl, Chávez said.

Most of the illegal fentanyl comes from China and is smuggled in vehicles into the U.S. through ports of entry along the border with Mexico.

A September reporter by the Cato Institute found that “over 90 percent of fentanyl seizures occur at legal crossing points or interior vehicle checkpoints, not on illegal migration routes.”

Chávez said the majority of the fentanyl pills that get to North Texas and in Oklahoma originate, in raw form, from China.

“Chinese criminal organizations are then bringing it into Mexico, where they are pressed into pills that mimic traditional pharmaceutical products and are made to look just like hydrocodone, Oxycodone, and then are transported to the U.S. via two primary Mexican drug trafficking cartels, the Sinaloa Cartel, and the cartel Jalisco Nueva Generación.”

Once in the United States, the drug is distributed and controlled by people who work directly for the cartels, by gangs, or by people who sell in neighborhoods or schools.

Debbie Peterson, 54, lost her son Matthew Neal Harvey, 30, in January to an overdose.

Matthew sometimes used drugs recreationally, she said, and on that day he asked his dealer for an Oxycodone. He was given a fentanyl pill instead.

“We found him in his apartment and he had already been dead for at least a day,” Peterson said. “On his phone we could see the conversation he had with the person who gave him the pill and in the dialogue, it was that he asked for ‘an Oxi’, but the toxicological exam revealed that he died of a fentanyl overdose.”

During the investigation the police found half a pill that later was determined to be fentanyl.

Christine Peña lost in 2020 her 21-year-old daughter Angelina Rogers to an accidental fentanyl overdose when she was recuperating from an endometriosis surgery. Someone offered a fentanyl pill saying it was Oxycodone and she died after a three-day comma in the hospital.

“The (coroner’s) report says that she died of an overdose, but the truth is that my daughter was poisoned.”