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Possible fentanyl overdose deaths due to stimulant use in San Francisco

Three men were found dead on Page Street on February 22, 2018. Although the cause of death is not yet determined, fentanyl poisoning is suspected. Glass pipes found at the scene, typically used for smoking cocaine or methamphetamine, were found to contain cocaine, methamphetamine, fentanyl, and a possible fentanyl analogue. Fentanyl has been increasingly present in street-purchased drugs (including methamphetamine, cocaine, heroin, and counterfeit benzodiazepines and prescription opioids) in San Francisco. Fentanyl test strips provided by syringe access programs identified the presence of fentanyl in the majority of street-purchased drugs tested in 2017, although the test is qualitative and results may represent trace contamination in some cases. In 2016, 22 of 105 opioid overdose deaths were caused by fentanyl, double the number from 2015. Of these 22 cases, 45% also involved methamphetamine, 27% cocaine, and 41% another opioid. Death from fentanyl toxicity can be more rapid than from other opioids, thus prompt peer response is essential.

We recommend that anyone using street-purchased drugs carry naloxone, the short-acting opioid antagonist. Naloxone can be administered by witnesses as a first aid measure, is covered by Medi-Cal, Healthy SF, and most health plans, and can be furnished without a prescription by pharmacists registered to do so. Naloxone can be obtained from the Community Behavioral Health Services (CBHS) Pharmacy at 1380 Howard Street on a walk-in basis (see below). Naloxone is also available at no cost from the DOPE Project for people who use drugs via syringe access sites and other community-based programs. Additional measures include advising anyone who uses street-purchased drugs to test their drugs for fentanyl (test strips available at syringe access sites), use “tester” doses to ensure there are no unexpected effects, and if using in a group, stagger drug use so that someone is alert to help others if needed.

Actions requested of SF clinicians:

- 1. Refer patients with opioid use disorder to treatment.** San Francisco has treatment available on demand, which can be accessed at methadone programs or through the triage center at 1380 Howard St.
- 2. Ensure patients who access ANY street-purchased drugs have naloxone.** Either prescribe naloxone directly or direct people to the pharmacy at 1380 Howard Street or to syringe access sites. Patients should be encouraged to keep the medication with them at all times.
- 3. Advise patients who use drugs to test their drugs, use “tester” doses, and stagger drug use.**

Resources for Substance Use Treatment and Naloxone:

- Treatment Referrals:
 - SFDPH triage center – Treatment Access Program (TAP) @ 1380 Howard Street, 8 a.m.-4:30 p.m. weekdays
 - BAART Clinic @ 433 Turk St, 7:30 a.m.-Noon for same day methadone; Call 415-928-7800 and ask for intake counselor
 - List of physicians who provide buprenorphine: http://buprenorphine.samhsa.gov/bwns_locator/
- Naloxone from the CBHS Pharmacy at 1380 Howard Street, Monday-Friday walk-in 9:30 a.m.-4 p.m. (no prescription required).
- Naloxone from the DOPE Project: Contact Kristen Marshall at marshallwheeler@harmreduction.org or call 919-637-8632 for the distribution schedule
- Naloxone prescribing information (scroll down to Naloxone Prescribing, Education, and Awareness): <http://www.sfhealthnetwork.org/employee-physicians/pain-management-resources/>