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Deputy Attorney General: We're making strides in protecting Americans from fentanyl

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The synthetic drug has crept into our streets from China as a symptom of our worsening opioid crisis. The danger is real and here is how my colleagues and I are stopping it.



(Photo: Seth Harrison, The Journal News)

Before you finish reading this article, another American will probably die of a drug overdose. Every year since 2015, more Americans have died from drug overdoses than died in the entire Vietnam War (https://www.va.gov/opa/publications/factsheets/fs_americas_wars.pdf). The annual toll soared from 36,450 in 2008 (<https://wonder.cdc.gov/>) to 64,000 in 2016 (https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/health_policy/monthly-drug-overdose-death-estimates.pdf). On average, seven Americans die of a drug overdose every hour. As a result, drug overdose is now the leading cause of death for Americans under the age of 50 (<https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2017/06/05/upshot/opioid-epidemic-drug-overdose-deaths-are-rising-faster-than-ever.html?mtrref=undefined&gwh=CBF51B39FA8A8436BAE5EFC8F61BF0F7&gwt=pay>).

Nearly two-thirds of 2015 drug-related deaths (https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/health_policy/monthly-drug-overdose-death-estimates.pdf) in the United States involve opioid drugs (<https://www.economist.com/blogs/graphicdetail/2017/03/daily-chart-3>). The causes are pharmaceutical painkiller drugs such as oxycodone, well-known illegal drugs such as heroin, and new synthetic drugs such as fentanyl.

More: [Opioid crisis has a new leading killer: fentanyl \(/story/opinion/2017/10/25/opioid-crisis-has-new-leading-killer-fentanyl-editorials-debates/801185001/\)](/story/opinion/2017/10/25/opioid-crisis-has-new-leading-killer-fentanyl-editorials-debates/801185001/)

More: [Declare opioid 'national emergency' \(/story/opinion/2017/08/01/declare-opioid-national-emergency-editorials-debates/467223001/\)](/story/opinion/2017/08/01/declare-opioid-national-emergency-editorials-debates/467223001/)

Abuse of one type of opioid drug increases your vulnerability to the others. People who abuse prescription painkillers are much more likely to try heroin. Heroin is easier to get, produces a more intense high, and is a lot cheaper. In fact, four out of five heroin addicts say that they started with prescription painkillers (<https://www.drugabuse.gov/publications/research-reports/relationship-between-prescription-drug-heroin-abuse/prescription-opioid-use-risk-factor-heroin-use>). Heroin overdose deaths rose from about 3,000 in 2010 (<https://wonder.cdc.gov/>) to more than 15,000 last year (https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/health_policy/monthly-drug-overdose-death-estimates.pdf). But heroin is no longer our most serious concern.

The newest killer drug — fentanyl — is a more toxic poison (<https://www.forbes.com/forbes/welcome/?toURL=https://www.forbes.com/sites/alicegwalton/2016/04/09/why-fentanyl-is-so-much-more-deadly-than-heroin&refURL=https://www.google.com/&referrer=https://www.google.com/>) than heroin. Fentanyl is a synthetic drug (<https://www.drugabuse.gov/drugs-abuse/fentanyl>), meaning that it is manufactured in a chemistry lab and is not found in natural forms. By slightly altering the manufacturing process, illicit chemists can create new versions of fentanyl with the same general effect on the human brain. These variants, known as analogues, pose two pernicious problems.

First, molecular changes can make the substance legally different from fentanyl analogues that have already been controlled, so chemists exploiting this loophole can stay one step ahead of law enforcement authorities.

Second, fentanyl analogues vary dramatically in potency. Standard fentanyl is approximately 50 times stronger than heroin (https://www.dea.gov/pr/multimedia-library/publications/drug_of_abuse.pdf#page=40). Fentanyl analogues, on the other hand, can be more than 10 times stronger than that. One variant of fentanyl is so powerful (http://www.rhinosourcecenter.com/pdf_files/150/1507127832.pdf) that small doses are used to tranquilize elephants.

A miniscule amount of pure fentanyl — about the size of a pinch of salt, in many cases — [can kill a person](http://Three%20milligrams:%20http://www.pbs.org/newshour/rundown/fentanyl-deadlier-heroin-single-photo/) (<http://Three%20milligrams:%20http://www.pbs.org/newshour/rundown/fentanyl-deadlier-heroin-single-photo/>). Users have no idea what dosage they are getting when they take illicit forms of fentanyl or its analogues. And drug dealers often [lace fentanyl with other drugs](https://www.vice.com/en_us/article/avazbe/why-are-dealers-cutting-fentanyl-into-recreational-drugs) (https://www.vice.com/en_us/article/avazbe/why-are-dealers-cutting-fentanyl-into-recreational-drugs) like heroin and cocaine, typically without telling their unsuspecting customers. The resulting cocktail can be lethal.

Illegal drugs are not just dangerous to users. They can be dangerous to anyone who comes into contact with them, including first responders who arrive at the scene of an overdose.

Most illicit fentanyl and fentanyl analogues come from China. The drugs are [smuggled into the United States](http://securepackages.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/02/USCC-Staff-Report_Fentanyl-China%E2%80%99s-Deadly-Export-to-the-United-States020117.pdf) (http://securepackages.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/02/USCC-Staff-Report_Fentanyl-China%E2%80%99s-Deadly-Export-to-the-United-States020117.pdf) either through the mail or across our borders. The result is that the drugs sold on our streets are now more powerful, more addictive and more dangerous than ever.

Last week, President Donald J. Trump took a bold step in addressing this drug epidemic by directing the [declaration of a public health emergency](/story/news/politics/2017/10/26/exclusive-trump-declare-public-health-emergency-opioid-crisis-partial-measure-figh/796797001/) (</story/news/politics/2017/10/26/exclusive-trump-declare-public-health-emergency-opioid-crisis-partial-measure-figh/796797001/>). This is will help focus the resources of the United States government on the opioid crisis at hand.

More: [Opinion: Opioid crisis requires well-trained physician workforce](/story/opinion/contributors/2017/10/18/opinion-opioid-crisis-requires-well-trained-physician-workforce/776189001/) (</story/opinion/contributors/2017/10/18/opinion-opioid-crisis-requires-well-trained-physician-workforce/776189001/>)

POLICING THE USA: A look at race, justice, media (<http://POLICING%20THE%20USA:%20A%20look%20at%20race.%20justice.%20media>)

The Department of Justice is acting with [great urgency and vigilance](https://www.justice.gov/opa/speech/deputy-attorney-general-rod-j-rosenstein-delivers-remarks-dea-fentanyl-guidance) (<https://www.justice.gov/opa/speech/deputy-attorney-general-rod-j-rosenstein-delivers-remarks-dea-fentanyl-guidance>). The Attorney General authorized federal prosecutors to put drug traffickers out of business by using [all the lawful tools at their disposal](http://www.npr.org/2017/05/04/526784152/dea-seeks-prosecutors-to-fight-opioid-crisis-critics-fear-return-to-war-on-drugs) (<http://www.npr.org/2017/05/04/526784152/dea-seeks-prosecutors-to-fight-opioid-crisis-critics-fear-return-to-war-on-drugs>). The new policy helps prosecutors target narcotics traffickers, crack down on health care fraud, secure our borders and break up criminal gangs. It will save lives.

In July, the department announced the largest ever [health care fraud takedown](https://www.justice.gov/opa/pr/national-health-care-fraud-takedown-results-charges-against-over-412-individuals-responsible) (<https://www.justice.gov/opa/pr/national-health-care-fraud-takedown-results-charges-against-over-412-individuals-responsible>). We arrested [more than 400 defendants](https://www.nytimes.com/2017/07/13/us/politics/health-care-fraud.html?mtrref=www.google.com&qwh=4879C63C0DBDB1C52ADFFC1FAD18EEC7&gwt=pay) (<https://www.nytimes.com/2017/07/13/us/politics/health-care-fraud.html?mtrref=www.google.com&qwh=4879C63C0DBDB1C52ADFFC1FAD18EEC7&gwt=pay>), including many crooked doctors charged with opioid-related crimes. In August, the attorney general created the [Opioid Fraud and Abuse Detection Unit](https://www.justice.gov/opa/pr/attorney-general-sessions-announces-opioid-fraud-and-abuse-detection-unit) (<https://www.justice.gov/opa/pr/attorney-general-sessions-announces-opioid-fraud-and-abuse-detection-unit>) and funded twelve experienced prosecutors to focus solely on investigating and prosecuting doctors, pharmacies and medical providers who worsen the crisis by unlawfully dispensing and diverting prescription opioids.

Every day, traffickers ship highly dangerous illicit fentanyl and its analogues [through the mail](https://www.fastcompany.com/3063518/carfentanil-synthetic-opioids-heroin) (<https://www.fastcompany.com/3063518/carfentanil-synthetic-opioids-heroin>) to drug dealers and users in the United States. The shippers often layer transactions and mask their identities, making it difficult for the Postal Inspection Service or Customs and Border Protection to identify which packages, among the hundreds of thousands arriving in our country every day, contain deadly drugs.

Chinese and American law enforcement are [working cooperatively](http://www.wbur.org/hereandnow/2017/07/31/us-opioids-heroin-fentanyl) (<http://www.wbur.org/hereandnow/2017/07/31/us-opioids-heroin-fentanyl>), but we are asking our Chinese counterparts to take additional steps to identify and stop distributors in China from sending fentanyl and its analogues to the United States and other countries. We understand that the task of identifying suspected fentanyl and other contraband from the vast quantities of legitimate Chinese exports will be a challenge, but we ask China to tackle this challenge.

When China and the United States work together to control particular fentanyl analogues and restrict their transfer, the flow of those illicit opioids decreases in the United States. While most seizures in the United States [involve fentanyl itself](http://heroin.net/think/the-american-fentanyl-epidemic/) (<http://heroin.net/think/the-american-fentanyl-epidemic/>) or analogues controlled in both countries, unscrupulous manufacturers continue to produce and smuggle unregulated analogues. Right now, [we are playing a deadly game](http://www.sciencemag.org/news/2017/03/underground-labs-china-are-devising-potent-new-opiates-faster-authorities-can-respond) (<http://www.sciencemag.org/news/2017/03/underground-labs-china-are-devising-potent-new-opiates-faster-authorities-can-respond>) of “whack-a-mole,” where the United States and its international partners identify and control one variant of fentanyl, only for illicit drug traffickers to evade the law by tinkering with the chemical formula.

Early this year, the United Nations Commission on Narcotic Drugs [unanimously recommended](https://www.incb.org/incb/en/news/press-releases/2017/press_release20170202.html) (https://www.incb.org/incb/en/news/press-releases/2017/press_release20170202.html) controlling two fentanyl precursor chemicals, known as ANPP and NPP, under the 1988 Convention Against Illicit Traffic in Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances. These lethal fentanyl ingredients are too [readily available](https://www.statnews.com/2016/04/05/fentanyl-traced-to-china/) (<https://www.statnews.com/2016/04/05/fentanyl-traced-to-china/>) in China. It is important for China to join the United States and other countries to implement this recommendation and control these precursor chemicals.

China has taken [significant and noteworthy measures](https://www.wsj.com/articles/china-moves-to-keep-its-deadly-opioids-out-of-u-s-1487241189) (<https://www.wsj.com/articles/china-moves-to-keep-its-deadly-opioids-out-of-u-s-1487241189>) to address the deadly flow of opioids, and we applaud those efforts. But given the worsening scale of this epidemic, China and other countries must take additional steps to save lives.

In the meantime, you do not need to be a diplomat, prosecutor, or police officer to help end this epidemic. Everyone can help prevent drug addiction.

We need people to spread the word that illicit drugs can ruin or even end your life. By educating people about the dangers of drug abuse, and the often undisclosed presence of deadly fentanyl and its analogues in a variety of street drugs, you can be part of the solution.

Rod Rosenstein is the deputy U.S. attorney general.

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