

What is Fentanyl?

Fentanyl is a potent synthetic opioid produced by licensed pharmaceutical laboratories. The drug is prescribed to reduce chronic pain in people suffering from serious health issues, like cancer or end of life care. Fentanyl was originally developed as an anesthetic used during surgery. In the early 2000s, transdermal patches were introduced to manage chronic pain in patients who require continuous opioid pain control. Medication is slowly released through the skin into the bloodstream over a 48 to 72 hour period. Fentanyl is up to 100 times stronger than morphine and 10-20 times stronger than heroin. It is one of the strongest pain relievers available and has a high risk for abuse.

Fentanyl Diversion and Abuse

Typically, transdermal fentanyl patches are discarded after three days (72 hours) of use and replaced by a new patch. Disposal procedures vary with some being thrown in the garbage, flushed down the toilet, deposited into sharps containers, or returned to a pharmacy. Even after three days of use, fentanyl patches contain a large percentage of the medication (60-80%) which makes them a wanted commodity for sale on the street. The street value of a fentanyl patch varies between \$150-\$500.

Fentanyl can be diverted via pharmacy thefts, fraudulent prescriptions, home invasions, and illicit distribution by patients and registrants (physicians and pharmacists). Theft has also been identified at nursing homes and other long-term care facilities.

The fentanyl patches are often cut up and sold on the street. The gel contents from the patches are smoked, ingested or injected or the pieces chewed. These methods deliver a much higher dose of fentanyl than the original prescription intended. Since the distribution of the medication is unknown when cut, a single patch can be lethal.

When used for non-medical purposes, fentanyl has been resulting in significant overdose deaths. The Ontario Office of the Chief Coroner reports that from 2009-2013, 549 deaths have been associated with fentanyl in Ontario and that 36 of those deaths have been in Middlesex-London.

What is the Fentanyl Patch Return Program?

A Fentanyl Patch Return Program is a collaborative partnership between physicians, pharmacists and patients to promote the safe, effective and responsible use of fentanyl patches. The program applies a "one in, one out" model, where the patient returns any patches received back to the pharmacy before they are able to receive more. The goal is to ensure proper disposal of used fentanyl patches to avoid harm to others (e.g., children and pets) and to eliminate illicit street diversion.

The program is designed to reduce diversion with increasing fentanyl patch tracking by:

1. Physicians prescribing and pharmacies dispensing no more than a one-month supply of fentanyl patches at a time to patients with fentanyl prescriptions.
2. Ensuring that patients are provided education on the program and an information fact sheet that is also used as a patch return sheet.
3. Prescriptions are written to direct the pharmacist to collect used or unused patches before dispensing the next set of patches.
4. Documenting the date and the number of patches returned.
5. Dispensing one new patch for every used patch returned.
6. Increasing communication between pharmacies and physicians (and police if necessary) if there is a concern about diversion or other inappropriate fentanyl patch use.

More Information

Program documents for physicians, pharmacists and patients can be found on the [Health Unit Website](#).