Fentanyl Exposure, Protection, and Treatment

Myths and Facts

EXPOSURE

MYTH: Touching even a small amount of fentanyl can cause opioid overdose, coma, or death.

➤ FACT: Incidental skin exposure to fentanyl is extremely unlikely to immediately harm you.
  - Fentanyl and other potent synthetic opioids may appear as a powder, tablet, capsule, or in solution
  - Inhaling or transferring fentanyl from skin to mucous membranes (eyes, nose or mouth) are the most common types of incidental exposure
  - DO: wash the affected area with soap and water as soon as possible to easily remove fentanyl residue
  - DON’T use alcohol-based hand sanitizers, wipes or products. They may increase absorption of fentanyl

MYTH: First responders have overdosed after contact with a fentanyl overdose victim or contaminated environment.

➤ FACT: Most first responders’ encounters with overdose victims and contaminated environments do not present a significant drug exposure threat to responders.
  - Experts agree that routine encounters to fentanyl does not present a significant risk of drug exposure
  - DO: ensure that all commonly used controls and protocols are followed
  - Wear appropriate personal protective equipment (PPE), especially in unusual situations such as:
    - High concentrations of airborne fentanyl powder, environmental contamination, etc.
  - There is no documented evidence of responders becoming ill after skin contact with fentanyl

PROTECTION

MYTH: PPE cannot protect you from fentanyl exposure.

➤ FACT: Worn correctly, Personal Protective Equipment will protect you.
  - DO: wear PPE identified for the task when exposure to drug powders is likely
  - PPE includes gloves, properly fitted respiratory protection, and safety eyewear
  - See CSA reference below for additional information regarding PPE selection
  - DON’T use powdered gloves; powder particulates from the gloves may absorb and spread contaminants to unintended surfaces

MYTH: Standard precautions for dealing with suspicious substances do not apply to fentanyl.

➤ FACT: Occupational Health and Safety precautions on contact with unknown powdered substances are appropriate for most incidental encounters with fentanyl.
  - DO: avoid direct contact with fentanyl if possible
  - Wear appropriate PPE identified as required for the specific task or activity
  - Wash your hands with soap and water often and after handling suspicious substances
  - Soap and water is a useful control to reduce powder contamination
  - Use proper decontamination and notification procedures for contaminated equipment or clothing
  - DON’T eat, drink or smoke after handling a suspicious substance until you have washed your hands

TREATMENT

MYTH: Naloxone (e.g. NARCAN Nasal Spray) is not safe and counteracts the effects of an opioid overdose including fentanyl and other synthetic opioids.

➤ FACT: Naloxone (e.g. NARCAN Nasal Spray) is safe and counteracts the effects of an opioid overdose including fentanyl and other synthetic opioids.
  - DON’T delay. Administer naloxone (following departmental policy and protocols), if you suspect an overdose
  - DO: In the event of a suspected opioid overdose, call immediately for emergency medical assistance. Naloxone is not a definitive medical treatment
  - The effects of naloxone are time limited; administer additional dose of naloxone if necessary, or if signs and symptoms reappear
  - If naloxone is not available, provide rescue breathing or life-saving efforts until emergency services arrive

MYTH: Feeling sick after encountering a powdered substance is a symptom of a fentanyl overdose.

➤ FACT: Fentanyl overdose signs/symptoms are the same as for all opioid overdoses: slowed/shallow breathing, decreasing consciousness, pinpoint pupils.
  - DO: administer naloxone if you suspect an overdose
  - DON’T confuse a fentanyl overdose with the signs and symptoms of other conditions
  - Dizziness, rapid heart rate, nausea and vomiting, or “feeling ill” are more specific to heat injuries, dehydration, and adrenaline responses
  - When in doubt, administer naloxone and call for emergency medical assistance

References:
- Consult your Departmental Occupational Health & Safety policies and relevant regulations and protective guidelines.
- Canadian Standards Association (CSA) Standard Z 94.4 – 11 Selection, Use and Care of Respirators.
- InterAgency Board Recommendations on Selection and Use of Personal Protective Equipment and Decontamination Products for First Responders Against Exposure Hazards to Synthetic Opioids, Including Fentanyl and Fentanyl Analogues*(August 2017) http://bit.ly/2xdi92PT