

Counterfeit pills: Widespread and deadly

What are counterfeit pills?

Counterfeit pills are fake pills made to look like real prescription medications that you get from a pharmacy. While they may look like real medications in terms of their size, coloring, stamps and packaging, they have different ingredients. They may contain more or less of the active ingredient, harmful ingredients, or the wrong medication altogether.

Of great concern are counterfeit pills that contain fentanyl, an extremely powerful pain reliever – 100 times more powerful than morphine and 50 times more powerful than heroin. The [Drug Enforcement Agency](#) (DEA) has seized more than 10 million of these pills in the past year as they have flooded the U.S. drug supply. Their test results show that 2 out of every 5 pills contains a potentially lethal amount of fentanyl.

Many people who buy counterfeit pills think they are getting a specific kind of pill but may actually get a fentanyl-laced pill. They risk overdose and can potentially pay the highest price for the pill – their lives.

Why are counterfeit pills on the rise?

Counterfeit pills are on the rise for many reasons, one especially being the amount of money that can be made selling these pills in a world-wide market. It doesn't matter to the sellers if it's at the expense of the buyer's health or life. Many sellers are trying to "cash in" on the opioid epidemic knowing that many people in our country are misusing or dependent on opioid pain relievers.

In addition, the high cost of prescription medications, the rise of online pharmacies, the ease of online sales through social media and delivery of products through the mail are contributing factors. And, there is a sense that the risks of getting caught are low.

Common counterfeit pills and substances

The most common counterfeit pills and substances include:

Pain relievers including Oxycodone (Oxycontin®, Percocet®) and Hydrocodone (Vicodin®)

Benzodiazepines such as Alprazolam (Xanax®)

Stimulants like amphetamines (Adderall®), cocaine, and methamphetamine

Heroin

MDMA (ecstasy or molly)

What is helpful for parents and other caregivers to know about counterfeit pills

Being equipped with facts about counterfeit pills and substances, including how risky and potentially deadly they are, is important. These pills are commonly advertised and sold on social media platforms or sold through a "friend of a friend". Teens may think they know what they are getting, but the pills look so realistic that it's hard to tell. Kids may know another person who got a pill from a seller, took it and was "fine"; not realizing that there is no quality control.

While it might be tempting to try a pill or a powder like cocaine at a party for "fun", out of curiosity or due to peer pressure, it can be deadly since counterfeit pills and other substances are often laced with fentanyl.

It's also important to be aware of [mental health problems](#), such as significant mood and behavior changes as kids may turn to counterfeit pills as a way to self-medicate.

How to talk to your loved ones about the risks/impacts of counterfeit pills

An important part of parenting is teaching kids about [medication safety](#) – the importance of getting medications from a legitimate pharmacy and taking them only as prescribed by your healthcare provider.

With the increasing number of counterfeit pills in our country, it's equally important to share the facts around them without using scare tactics. Asking open-ended questions that can't be answered with one word such as "What do you know about counterfeit pills being sold online?", or "Why do you think kids might be tempted to try pain pills or other medications?", can start the conversation.

Ensure your loved one that if they share concerns about a friend or themselves, that you will treat it as a health and safety problem and not resort to punishment. Depending upon the situation, professional help may be needed including counseling and medications.

If your child or loved one is using counterfeit pills or other substances laced with fentanyl, consider suggesting measures that can reduce the risks if treatment is not immediately available or possible such as:

1. Using [fentanyl test strips](#) to test pills and other substances for fentanyl.
2. Sharing other ways people who use pills determine if they are fake although these methods will not tell you if fentanyl is present. Break a pill in half and if it's crumbly and doesn't have the harder consistency of a regular pill, it's likely to be a fake pill that someone pressed on their own. Shine a light through a pill to see if there are impurities that wouldn't be present in a legitimate pill. In addition, real pills will weigh exactly the same. Fake ones often have different weights.
3. Having [naloxone](#) (Narcan) on hand, which is used to reverse an overdose
4. Using substances more slowly or in smaller amounts, and/or spacing out doses.
5. Having someone check in on your loved one or video chat them if they consume substances alone. If they are using substances with others, be sure that someone in the group is alert and able to use emergency naloxone if needed. The [Brave App](#) may also be of use as it uses a loved one's cell phone to detect an overdose and alert help.

Please help us spread the word. Knowing that these pills can be deadly may help us prevent overdoses and save lives. Together we can turn the tide on the opioid epidemic.