



Boston Public Health Commission

Health Advisory

HEROIN CONTAMINATED WITH FENTANYL

On February 7, 2014, the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) issued an advisory to the treatment community about a marked increase in deaths since the beginning of the year. This increase in deaths is reportedly linked to the use of heroin contaminated with the drug fentanyl. As you know, Fentanyl is a form of opioid, and when used in combination with heroin, can cause severe injury and even death. SAMHSA reported 17 deaths linked to the possible use of fentanyl-contaminated heroin in the Pittsburgh, Pa. area during the recent weeks and 22 deaths in Rhode Island were reported in January.

The abuse of illicit and prescription drugs continues to be a major issue in Boston, with high levels of abuse and deaths associated with opioids. Between 2010 and 2012, unintentional drug overdoses increased by 39% in the city of Boston. Heroin and prescription drug overdoses are on the rise among White, Black, and Latino residents. There was a 76% increase in the rate of heroin overdoses between 2010 and 2012, higher than the rate of increase for other substances. As of last week, Boston EMS had administered Narcan 52 times since the beginning of the year compared to 41 times between the same time period in 2013.

The Boston Public Health Commission (BPHC) encourages emergency departments and emergency response services, health care providers, substance abuse treatment services providers, public safety first responders, and the public to **exercise increased vigilance in promptly identifying suspected overdose patients** and taking appropriate action. Signs and symptoms of fentanyl overdose are consistent with opioid overdose and include: unconsciousness or unresponsiveness; respiratory depression or arrest; cyanosis; vomiting; and pinpoint pupils.

The Good Samaritan Law provides protection to people who call 911 to report drug overdoses. This law is intended to encourage people to report drug overdoses as soon as possible, even if drugs are present at the scene.

The BPHC's Overdose Prevention and Narcan distribution program trains opioid users and their families, providers and first responders on how to prevent, recognize, and intervene during an opioid overdose using nasal Narcan. Providers and residents interested in overdose prevention training can contact the BPHC Overdose Prevention Program at 617-534-3968.