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Heroin Users Warned About Deadly Addictive

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By Peter Slevin and Kari Lydersen
Washington Post Staff Writers
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CHICAGO -- The largest clue that something had changed in Chicago's vibrant heroin market came in February, when police found a dozen users sprawled unconscious in one place. One day in April, there were dozens more.

Toxicologists at the Cook County morgue discovered fentanyl, a powerful painkiller many times stronger than morphine, in the bodies of addicts who died. A small amount of fentanyl in a dose of heroin adds a pop that many users have come to crave.

"It's a new phenomenon. It's the latest high," said Chicago police spokeswoman Monique Bond, "but it's deadly."

Since February, coroners have recorded 55 fentanyl-related deaths in Cook County, with 45 more cases suspected. Some were unsuspecting users taking pure fentanyl; others were users taking a mixture. Scores overdosed but recovered -- and not all regretted using it.

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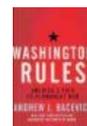
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"There's this consumer arc. At first there's fear, but then when the fear is over, it's like: Hey, that's good stuff," said Greg Scott, a DePaul University sociologist who conducts government-funded research on injected drugs. "Most so-called street addicts can't afford more than what they're already doing, so fentanyl gives you that little extra bump. People are scouting for it."

Authorities have spotted the practice in Pennsylvania and New Jersey, and it appears most serious in Detroit, where authorities suspect that more than 175 people have died in recent months from fentanyl-related overdoses. The national Centers for Disease Control and Prevention is investigating. Federal and local authorities are convening a workshop in Chicago next week to learn more.

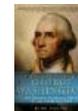
"It's baptism by fire here," Scott said.

The Chicago Recovery Alliance runs a weekly needle exchange and barbecue in a bus parking lot in Cicero, just outside city boundaries. At recent sessions, the organization has



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been warning users about the dangers and teaching them how to distinguish the mint green-tinted fentanyl-laced heroin from the typical Chicago drug, which tends to be yellowish or dusty brown.

"We tell them: If it's green, you shouldn't use it," said Cheryl Hull, the group's deputy director of operations, who reported that at least seven clients have died. Staffers have been urging users to be far more vigilant and to get high in twos or threes, never alone.

Cathy Piotrowski, who showed up for last week's barbecue, said she has overdosed four times on a fentanyl-heroin mix.

"You do it, then bam, you're just right out. You don't remember anything," said Piotrowski, 42, who reported taking three hits of heroin a day. "I'm warning people about it, saying this stuff is going around, so be careful."

Despite the obvious dangers, the quest for a bigger and better high is driving users to find the more potent fentanyl-heroin blend. Universal laws of marketing and sales are similarly driving the pushers to supply it, authorities said. Even the police unwittingly contributed to the phenomenon.

"The dealers were passing out free samples to attract users," police spokeswoman Bond said. "The police department was trying to be proactive by alerting the public about the bad heroin, but we were providing free marketing, basically providing a road map."

Scott, the DePaul sociologist, said four of the five heroin-dealing crews he is tracking are now selling the drug laced with fentanyl. They sell more dope in what is a competitive market, he said, and make more money. The users, especially those who can afford only a limited amount of heroin even as their tolerance grows through habitual use, see a way to get higher.

"For the same amount of money, you can get a product that's, let's say, 10 times more potent," Scott said.

Frankie is a 43-year-old homeless man who did not want to give his last name. He said he overdosed late last month on fentanyl-laced heroin he got for free on Chicago's Southwest Side. Police took him to the hospital. A former amateur boxer, he likened the effect to being slugged in the head and knocked out.

To him, the freebies did not make much sense.

"They were handing it out," he said, "but why kill your new customers?"

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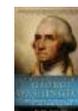
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