

**Fentanyl involved in 502 fatal overdoses in 2014, a five-fold increase**

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* A new silent killer, addictive and lethal, is stalking Ohioans and killing them in massive numbers.

Fentanyl¸a synthetic, highly addictive opiate 50 times more potent than heroin, was involved in 502 fatal overdoses last year, pushing Ohio drug deaths to 2,482, a staggering 17.6 percent jump over 2013, the Ohio Department of Health reported on Thursday.

It was another record year for death in a state that has lost more than 12,000 people to overdoses since 2002, and seen its drug death rate nearly quadruple.

Known by the street names of China white, dance fever, friend, goodfella, jackpot and murder 8, fentanyl killed five times as many people last year as in 2013, the health department report showed. It is often mixed with heroin and other drugs, usually without the user’s knowledge.

[**>>  Read the full report  <<**](http://www.dispatch.com/content/downloads/2015/09/2014_Ohio_Preliminary_Overdose_Report.pdf)

The new report, released seven months earlier than in the past to provide early feedback for government officials and treatment agencies, was a setback for a state working for five years to break the chain of drug addiction deaths.

“At the same time we are experiencing positive progress in our fight against drug addiction,” said Mark Hurst, medical director of the Ohio Department of Mental Health and Addiction Services. “ We are also seeing some individuals begin to use more-dangerous drugs to achieve more intense effects.”

Fatal overdoses rose significantly in almost every category in 2014: heroin (1,177 compared with 983 in 2013); prescription opioids (1,155 from 726); cocaine (511 from 405); and even alcohol (376 from 304).

The drug-death rate last year was 21.4 per 100,000 Ohioans, up from 5.7 per 100,000 in 2003.

Dr. John Leff, an Upper Arlington parent and chairman of general surgery at Riverside Methodist Hospital, called the statistics “eye-opening.”

“It’s an unfortunate epidemic that’s gaining momentum,” he said. “People are choosing to switch to even more addictive opiates.”

Fantanyl, used during anesthesia and to treat severe pain, is “an extremely powerful drug. It’s very rapid onset and a significant high,” he said.

Leff said Riverside is seeing an increase in heroin and fentanyl overdoses, countering the stereotype it is an inner-city problem.

Doctors have adapted by writing fewer opioid prescriptions, “but the problem is still growing,” Leff said. “This is all of our problem.”

Tracy Plouck, director of the Ohio Department of Mental Health and Addiction Services, said the overdose results are “disappointing. But we’re seeing progress on a number of fronts ... This is a multifaceted challenge. We are taking steps in prevention, stopping use of drugs in the first place, intervention, treatment and law enforcement. We want to try to save as many lives as possible.”

In an unusual twist, overdose deaths in the state’s two largest counties, Franklin and Cuyahoga, dropped slightly last year. Franklin County recorded 193 deaths compared to 197 the previous year, while Cuyahoga reported 254 fatalities, down from 255.

Other areas more than made up with difference, with deaths shooting up in Montgomery, Butler, Hamilton, Lucas and Summit counties.

State officials said they are asked the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention “to fully analyze Ohio’s fentanyl-related drug overdose data so that local and state officials, law enforcement and doctors better understand the nature of the fentanyl problem in Ohio and how to address it.”

U.S. Rep. Tim Ryan, D-Niles, head of a congressional addiction and treatment caucus, said he was “heartbroken” by the numbers.

“Unfortunately this epidemic only continues to grow in our state,” he said in a statement. “Last year in Summit County 56 people died from heroin overdose — and in just one week in Trumbull County, seven people died from overdose. Addiction is a disease, and the people suffering need care just like anyone else who gets sick in this country, yet only 1 out of 10 Americans who suffers from substance abuse gets treated.”

Marcie Seidel, executive director of the Drug Free Action Alliance, said the report “doesn’t paint the picture we desire, yet we are hopeful. Substance abuse disorders are progressive brain diseases, so there is a difficult lag time between the implementation of sound public policy and measurable results.

“The surge of heroin laced with street-made fentanyl is a deadly new factor, as indicated in the report. It is imperative that an emphasis on prevention principles is necessary to keep individuals, especially youth, from ever starting to use drugs.”

State officials said they have seen promising signs, including 40 million fewer doses of opioids prescribed for Ohioans last year, a reduction in high-dose pain prescriptions, and less “ doctor-shopping” by people seeking multiple prescriptions of painkillers.

They released a list of more than two dozen steps being taken in the war on drugs, including a statewide health alert and media campaign about fentanyl, working with law enforcement and the Ohio National Guard to “disrupt the supply line” for drugs, providing more community “takeback” opportunities, expanding Medicaid to increase treatment options, and encouraging greater use of Naloxone, a drug that stops overdoses when administered in time.

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