

March 28, 2022

Dear Community Partner,

The Georgia Department of Public Health (DPH) has received reports of increased overdoses (OD) in various areas of the state over the past month which are caused by drugs mixed with fentanyl, particularly cocaine, methamphetamine, and counterfeit pills. We have reason to suspect these substances and related overdoses will continue to show up across the state of Georgia. In addition, these fentanyl-containing drugs have appeared in and caused overdoses in other states, including Florida. *It is critical that drug users understand that there is a risk of overdose when using stimulants or other drugs that may be mixed with fentanyl.*

Fentanyl-related overdose deaths have been increasing in Georgia since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. Compared to the previous 12-month period, during May 1, 2020 – April 30, 2021 Fentanyl-involved overdose deaths increased 106.2%¹.

If you are seeing unusual overdose activity or suspect the presence of possible counterfeit pills or street drugs mixed with fentanyl in your area, please notify the DPH Drug Surveillance Unit (DSU) at ga.opioidprogram@dph.ga.gov. To report an overdose you think may be related to these drugs or for toxicological advice, call the Georgia Poison Center at **1-800-222-1222**.

Summary of Suspect Fentanyl Cluster

On Thursday 2/17 DSU received an alert from the Savannah Police Department, via the Coastal Health District 9-1, of a drug seizure that included pressed oxycodone pills containing fentanyl and a mixture of cocaine + fentanyl called “cream”.

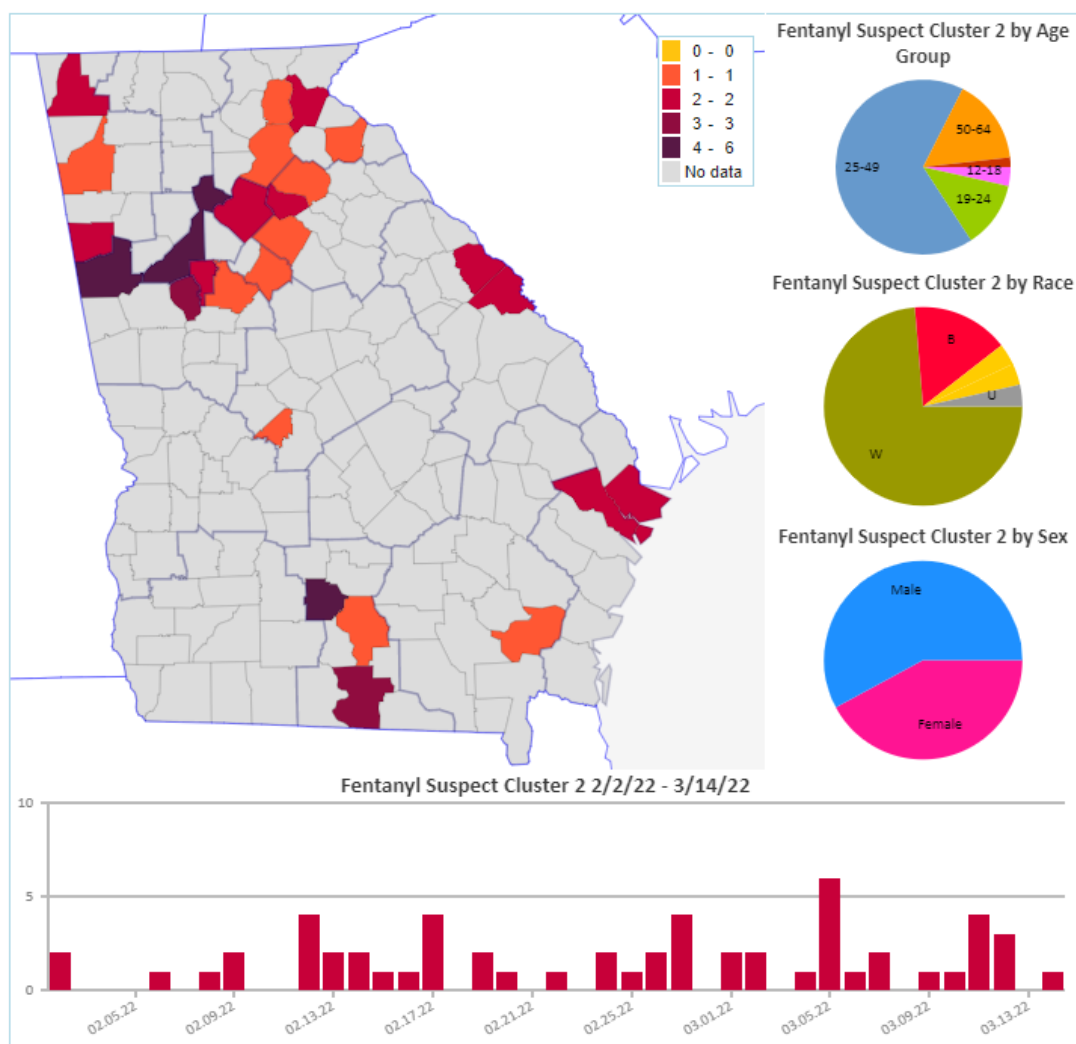
DSU reviewed Syndromic Surveillance (SS) data from around the state to identify ODs that may be related to drugs that contain fentanyl. SS tracks suspected drug overdose-involved emergency department visits based on the patient’s chief complaint upon admission and/or discharge diagnosis, and is used as an early detection method for potential clusters or outbreaks².

- 57 ED visits were identified from 2/2/22 – 3/14/22, with 89% of visits occurring after 2/12/22.
- These visits mentioned cocaine, amphetamine/methamphetamine, crack cocaine, heroin, or pills (e.g. oxycodone, hydrocodone, Klonopin, “muscle relaxers”, “unknown pill”).

¹ Data Source: Georgia Department of Public Health (DPH) Vital Records death certificates. Includes deaths that occurred in Georgia among Georgia residents and deaths that occurred outside of Georgia among Georgia residents.

² Because syndromic surveillance is based on chief complaint upon admission to an ED, it does not always reflect the true diagnosis, and can have limited detail to understand the true nature of the visit. For this reason, cases picked up by syndromic surveillance are only *SUSPECT* overdoses until further investigation is completed. Please see [here](#) for additional SS data limitations.

- Visits also indicated that the substance was possibly mixed with fentanyl, described an extreme reaction to a drug (e.g. patient reported taking 1 pill and went unresponsive immediately), or indicated that they had taken a stimulant or an unknown pill or substance and had a positive response to naloxone (i.e. Narcan).
- See below for geographic and demographic distribution of the visits related to this suspect cluster. (*note: Visits are de-identified and may include patients that were seen multiple times, and do not represent the number of individuals involved.*)



Examination of Emergency Medical Services (EMS) data during the same time period (2/6/2022 – 3/15/2022) revealed 16 OD incidents reportedly involving cocaine. In each case, EMS responded to a possible overdose where the patient or a friend on the scene indicated cocaine or crack use. No other substances were mentioned, however each of the 16 patients responded positively to naloxone. These incidents took place in several counties throughout the state including Fulton (6 cases), DeKalb (3 cases), Gwinnett (2 cases), Habersham (2 cases), and 1 case each in Cobb, Hall, and Tift.

Follow-up Investigation and Actions to date

Coastal District 9-1 (Savannah) has updated their community partners including law enforcement, first responders, and harm reduction, and has not received any additional reports to date.

South District 8-1 (Valdosta) notified their community partners after receiving an OD SS alert and confirmed a cluster of 4 overdoses involving cocaine and fentanyl.

Response and Next Steps

These drugs are dangerous and should not be handled without Personal Protective Equipment (PPE). They could possibly be inhaled or absorbed through the skin and are extremely toxic in even the smallest quantities. Early recognition of symptoms of overdose and appropriate PPE is critical to preventing overdoses and protecting first responders.

If a counterfeit pill or drug suspected to contain fentanyl is found:

- Wear adequate PPE when handling the substance.
- Specific recommendations from the GBI include double gloving, gown, n95 mask and goggles (please see the attached guidance for more specific details).
- Double bag the substance with a bio-hazard label on the outside and handle per agency protocol.

Whenever possible, naloxone should be carried when working in an environment where an overdose incident may occur.

- Georgia has a standing order for prescription of naloxone for overdose prevention, which makes naloxone available at any pharmacy without a prescription. For details on the standing order, please see the document available here: <https://dph.georgia.gov/document/document/standing-order/download>.
- When administering naloxone, please note that multiple doses may be necessary.

DPH will continue to monitor this situation and provide updates as they are warranted. We ask that you continue to keep DPH informed of any relevant updates. For more information about overdose prevention and Georgia's response please visit, <https://dph.georgia.gov/stopopioidaddiction>.

Thank you for all that you do.

Sincerely,



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State Epidemiologist



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