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To: All EMS Healthcare Professionals



From: Wisconsin Emergency Medical Services Section

Safety Memo – Carfentanil and Other Synthetic Opioids

In April of 2017, the Milwaukee County Medical Examiner reported three deaths linked to carfentanil. Carfentanil is a synthetic opioid approximately 10,000 times more potent than morphine and 100 times more potent than fentanyl. This drug poses a significant threat to first responders who may be exposed to even tiny amounts, as may occur when examining a bag or container of an unknown substance. Carfentanil and other fentanyl-related compounds may come in several forms, including powder, blotter paper, tablets, patches and sprays. Exposure to carfentanil can occur through inhalation, contact with mucus membranes, or even absorption through intact skin.

First responders are encouraged to have a high index of suspicion and exercise *extreme caution* in situations that may result in contact with these substances to prevent accidental exposures, and adhere to the following recommendations from the US Drug Enforcement Agency:

- **Exercise extreme caution.** Only properly trained and outfitted professionals should handle any substance or container suspected to contain carfentanil, fentanyl or any other opioid. If encountered, immediately contact the appropriate officials within your agency.
- **Monitor all personnel on scene for signs of exposure.** Symptoms of opioid exposure include: respiratory depression or arrest, drowsiness, disorientation, sedation, pinpoint pupils, and clammy skin. The onset of these symptoms usually occurs within minutes of exposure. *Also be aware that police canines can similarly suffer from exposures, and should be closely monitored for the same symptoms.*
- **Seek IMMEDIATE medical attention.** Carfentanil and other synthetic opioids can work very quickly, so in cases of suspected exposure, it is important to involve EMS immediately. It is critical to closely monitor the respiratory status of the affected individual, and *be ready to support them* with mouth-to-mouth, mouth-to-mask or bag valve mask as needed. If inhaled, move the victim to fresh air. If ingested and the victim is conscious, wash out the victim's eyes and mouth with cool water. If exposure is topical, wear gloves and thoroughly wash the skin with soap and water

- **Be ready to administer naloxone in the event of exposure.** Naloxone is an antidote for natural and synthetic opioid overdoses. Naloxone, if immediately administered, can reverse an overdose of carfentanil, fentanyl, heroin and other opioids. Because of the high potency of carfentanil, multiple doses of naloxone may be required to see a response. While supporting the airway as above, continue to administer a dose of naloxone every 2-3 minutes until the individual is breathing on his/her own for at least 15 minutes or until EMS arrives.
- **Remember that carfentanil and other synthetic opioids can resemble powdered cocaine or heroin.** Due to the consequences of carfentanil exposure, unless first responders have reliable knowledge identifying an unknown substance, do not take samples or otherwise disturb the substance, as this could lead to accidental exposure.
- **Personnel trained to handle and process these substances should follow best practices.** The Centers for Disease Control & Prevention has issued detailed guidance on risk assessment and personal protective equipment. These guidelines can be found at: <https://www.cdc.gov/niosh/topics/fentanyl/risk.html>.

For additional safety information, please see the resources below:

CDC Health Update: <https://emergency.cdc.gov/han/han00395.asp>

DEA Fentanyl Warning Video:

https://www.dea.gov/video_clips/Fentanyl%20Roll%20Call%20Video.mp4

If you have any questions, please contact the Wisconsin EMS office at 608-266-1568 or dhsemssmail@wisconsin.gov