

Fentanyl Test Strips Talking Points

Maryland Department of Health Center for Harm Reduction Services

April 2019

In response to fentanyl's proliferation of Maryland's illicit drug market, the Maryland Department of Health pursued novel drug checking technologies for distribution alongside naloxone to people who use drugs. Fentanyl test strips are used off-label to identify the presence or absence of trace amounts of fentanyl in a substance dissolved in water.¹ Based on the results of the test strips, people can choose to implement measures to reduce overdose risk of an opioid overdose. Published literature supports that people are willing to use fentanyl test strips and change behavior as a result of a positive test.

- Since 2014, large increases in overdose deaths in Maryland have been driven by fentanyl and fentanyl analogs. Fentanyl was involved in 77% of all overdose deaths in Q1 2018. Cocaine-related deaths increased 313% between 2015 and 2017. This surge has been primarily because of deaths from cocaine in combination with illicit opioids. In 2017, 71% of all cocaine-related deaths also involved fentanyl.²
- Fentanyl test strips have a high sensitivity and specificity for fentanyl and four of its analogs as compared to other testing devices.³
- Fentanyl test strips are not considered drug paraphernalia in Maryland.^{4,5}
- Fentanyl test strips may have a positive impact on an individual's self-efficacy to make a behavior change. Among people who used fentanyl test strips, 77% indicated that it made them feel more able to protect themselves from overdose.⁶
- Those who used strips and got a positive result were 5x more likely to change their behavior to reduce overdose risk in a Vancouver study.⁷
- In North Carolina, 43% reported a change in drug use behavior overall, regardless of a strip indicating the presence or not of fentanyl.⁶
- In Vancouver, 36% of participants reported planning to reduce their drug dose, which was associated with significantly lower odds of overdose.⁷

¹ National Harm Reduction Coalition: <https://harmreduction.org/issues/fentanyl/>

² Maryland Department of Health Overdose Data: https://bha.health.maryland.gov/overdose_prevention/pages/data-and-reports.aspx

³ Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health. FORCAST, published February 6, 2018: <https://americanhealth.jhu.edu/fentanyl/>

⁴ Drug Policy Alliance Infosheet: http://www.drugpolicy.org/sites/default/files/factsheet_drugcheckingmaryland_0.pdf

⁵ Senate Bill 1137 (Chapter 145), approved by the Governor April 24, 2018: http://mgaleg.maryland.gov/2018RS/chapters_noln/Ch_145_sb1137E.pdf

⁶ Peiper, N.C., International Journal of Drug Policy, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.drugpo.2018.08.007>

⁷ Karamouzian, M. Harm Reduction Journal. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12954-018-0252-8>

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