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SPOTLIGHT

New synthetic opioid linked to overdose death in San Francisco

By Natalia Gurevich | Examiner staff writer
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Cyclorphine is reportedly ten times more potent than fentanyl and city health officials are encouraging people to keep naloxone with them in the event of an overdose.

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A new synthetic opioid more potent than fentanyl was connected to an overdose death this month for the first time in San Francisco, public health officials said on Friday.

The opioid, N-Propionitrile Chlorphine, also known as cychlorphine, is estimated to be 10 times more potent than fentanyl. While it's been linked to deaths across the United States and Canada since last year, this is the first time it's been documented in San Francisco, prompting the San Francisco Department of Public Health to send out a health alert this week.

"[The] purpose of the health alert was not only to make our clinical communities aware, but to help reinforce that even a single pill has the potential to be deadly," Daniel Tsai, the director of the department, said on Friday.

The cychlorphine is believed to have been taken through a "counterfeit pill," meaning a pill that is not obtained through standard medical pharmacy channels. Two more synthetic opioids — N-desethyl Isotonitazene, also known as nitazene, and ethylbromazolam, a non-FDA-approved version of the nervous system sedative benzodiazepine — were found in the person's system.

Department officials declined to share more details about the person's death and stated only that it occurred this month. They directed further questions to the San Francisco Medical Examiner's Office, which declined to provide additional information.

There have been at least 25 overdose deaths identified in the United States linked to the drug as of January this year, according to a report issued by the Center for Forensic Science Research and Education. Three cases were in California.

Fentanyl test strips, which public health officials encourage people to use to make sure their substances don't contain the opioid, don't work with cychlorphine, said Dr. Philip Coffin, the director of substance use research in the Center for Public Health Research at DPH.

"So it's very important to really try to avoid counterfeit pills altogether," he said.

However, naloxone, or Narcan, is believed to help reverse the effects of an overdose of cychlorphine as it does with other opioids, Coffin said.

The drug has not been detected through any of The City's other means, which include testing patients at Zuckerberg San Francisco General Hospital. Cychlorphine was detected in two counterfeit oxycodone pills by the Drug Enforcement Administration's (DEA) San Francisco Field

Division in Northern California this month, the department confirmed with The Examiner in an emailed statement on Friday.

The U.S. Department of Justice issued its own alert about the presence of the drug around the country in January.

The drug does not have any known medical use, Coffin said.

This week's health alert called on clinicians to notify the department if their patients present with overdose symptoms consistent with the synthetic opioid exposure from suspected counterfeit pills. People are advised to avoid these pills if possible and carry naloxone. If these pills are used, people should try smaller doses, never alone, stagger use, and avoid mixing substances.

Overdose deaths In The City have been around 26% lower so far this year compared to the previous two years, according to preliminary data released from the San Francisco Medical Examiner's office on Friday.

There were 148 overdose deaths between January and March this year, compared to 199 last year and 204 in 2024. Despite these improvements, Tsai emphasized that work still needs to be done.

"We won't be satisfied until those numbers look far, far lower," he said.

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