

Understanding Fentanyl Test Strips: Pennsylvania

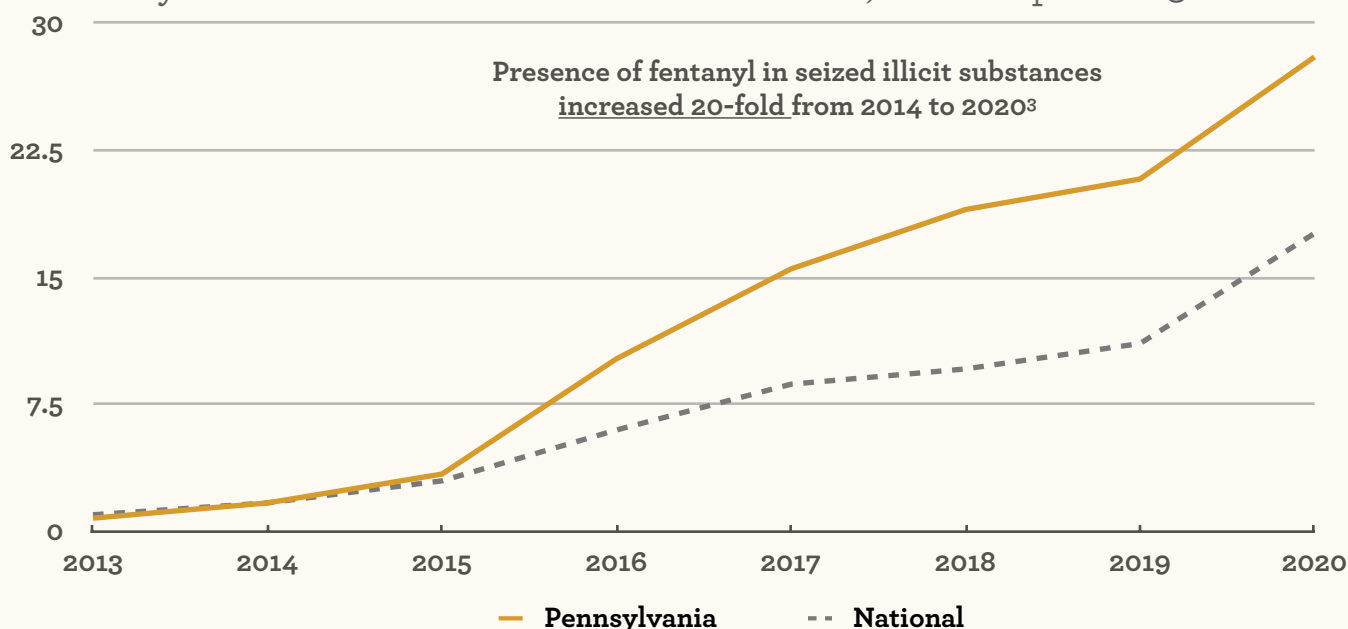


Opioid
Response
Network

Fentanyl is a powerful opioid analgesic – up to 100 times more potent than morphine. Sometimes prescribed to manage extreme pain, fentanyl is now most known because illicit production and non-medical use have risen dramatically since 2014.¹ Since then, the availability, use, and consequences of fentanyl have increased markedly, helping to drive the opioid crisis. When produced illicitly, fentanyl is frequently mixed with other substances – both opioids and other drugs. This practice increases the risk of accidental ingestion and overdose, including by people without opioid tolerance.² Fentanyl test strips are a key harm reduction tool, which can help prevent people from unknowingly ingesting fentanyl by testing for it in other substances.

Pennsylvania

Fentanyl-Involved Overdose Deaths Per 100,000 People 2013-2020



The Evidence Behind Fentanyl Test Strips

Test strips were originally developed to test urine for proof of fentanyl use but later discovered to be effective at testing products before ingestion.⁴ Fentanyl test strips are highly accurate and unlikely to produce false positives.⁵ Studies show that people who use drugs which may contain fentanyl are interested in using test strips and believe that test strips can be an important overdose prevention tool.^{6,7} Early research also suggests that people are more likely to change their risk behaviors after using test strips, such as consuming less than originally planned, ensuring naloxone availability, or arranging for a “buddy” to check on them.⁸



How to Use Fentanyl Test Strips

Using test strips is an easy and safe harm reduction approach that can significantly reduce the chances of an overdose. Test strips can be used with pills, powders, and injectable solutions. Each brand may have specific instructions, but the general process for using test strips is simple.⁹

- 1** Fill a small container with about 15mL of water (approximately 1 tablespoon)
- 2** If testing a non-powdered solid substance, such as a pill, crush into a powder
- 3** Add the substance to the water, swirling until they are mixed together
- 4** Hold the test strip white side down in the water for 10 seconds
- 5** Remove the strip and lay it flat on a clean area
- 6** Wait 60 seconds and read the results
 - *TWO visible red lines = NO fentanyl detected*
 - *ONE visible red line = YES fentanyl detected*

Important Facts About Fentanyl Test Strips¹⁰

Test strips must be **checked within 10 minutes** or results may no longer be valid

Test strips indicate the presence of fentanyl, but **do not reveal concentration or potency**

Test before each use. Fentanyl may not be evenly distributed and test strips only test small amounts of substances

False positives may be more common with **methamphetamine, MDMA, and Benadryl¹¹**

Test strips **do not end the need for general harm reduction strategies**, such as not using alone and access to naloxone

Obtaining and Distributing Fentanyl Test Strips

Individuals trying to access fentanyl test strips often face legal barriers. Historically, test strips were included under state and federal paraphernalia laws, effectively criminalizing their use. But access is expanding at all levels of government. For example, in 2021, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration announced that federal funding can be used to purchase test strips if they are directly related to the purpose of the supported program.¹² As of October 2021, thirty states still had laws prohibiting the possession and use of fentanyl test strips.¹³ However, as the need for further harm reduction has risen, many states are now moving towards allowing test strips through decriminalization or formally removing their drug paraphernalia classification.

Stakeholders interested in expanding access to test strips should first check with state and local groups to identify access points that already exist. Incorporating law enforcement into naloxone training and distribution has already demonstrated major success. Expanding this strategy to include fentanyl test strip training and distribution could increase community safety and reduce overdose deaths.

Common Distribution Methods¹⁴

- Supervised injection sites
- Syringe service facilities
- Mobile harm reduction services
- Overdose education events
- Substance use treatment programs
- Music festival “drug checks”

Notes

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