



# Frequently asked questions about fentanyl

In this section we share information on everything you always wanted to know about fentanyl but were afraid to ask.



Some questions and answers include this symbol, which indicates that, while we acknowledge these questions are common, we do not recommend this type of language because it stigmatizes people who use drugs.

If you want to learn more about how to cover drug markets, we recommend consulting our [glossary](#) as well as [this project](#) by the organizations Elementa DDHH and FES Colombia.

## What is fentanyl?

Fentanyl is a synthetic opioid derived from phenylpiperidine, used as an intravenous surgical anaesthetic and as an analgesic for chronic pain, in transdermal, sublingual, spray or intravenous form. Fentanyl is one of the most commonly used anaesthetics worldwide for surgical procedures due to its rapid absorption, its high potency that more easily penetrates the central nervous system and its ability to reduce postoperative pain. It is also an essential medicine for people with cancer or chronic pain who are tolerant to other opioid analgesics.

Fentanyl must be used under medical supervision because of the risk of respiratory depression that can lead to accidental overdose death, its high potential for problematic use, and withdrawal syndrome after prolonged use. In recent years, fentanyl has also begun to be manufactured illicitly and distributed in powder or counterfeit pill form to people with problematic opioid use, mainly in the United States and Canada.

## Is medical-grade fentanyl the same as the fentanyl sold by criminal groups?

No, they are not the same. Medical-grade fentanyl is a controlled synthetic opioid, produced under pharmaceutical standards and used in hospitals to treat severe pain, such as during surgeries or for cancer patients.

Illegally manufactured fentanyl is produced by organized crime without quality control, in clandestine laboratories, and is often mixed with other substances. Its dosage is imprecise and represents a high risk of overdose. Both are potent, but their origin, purity, use and risks are very different.





## Frequently asked questions about fentanyl

### How many types of fentanyl exist?

There are several types of fentanyl, classified as:

- Medical-grade fentanyl
  - Injectable (surgical use)
  - Transdermal patches
  - Sublingual tablets or pills (for severe pain)
- Illegally manufactured fentanyl
  - Powder (for snorting or injecting)
  - Counterfeit pills (such as M30)
  - Droppers or mixed with other drugs



### What are the medical uses of fentanyl?

Fentanyl has very specific and controlled medical uses and must be administered by medical staff with proper equipment and monitoring. These include:

- General anaesthesia in surgeries.
- Relief of severe pain in cancer or terminally ill patients, in the form of patches or injections.
- Sedation in intensive care, especially for intubated patients.

### If an anaesthesiologist gives me fentanyl during surgery, will I develop an addiction?

No, receiving fentanyl during surgery will not produce a substance use disorder. Fentanyl is a potent opioid used safely and under control in medical contexts, such as anaesthesia during surgeries. Its use in the operating room is supervised by specialists and administered in precise doses to control pain without causing dependence. Dependence generally develops after repeated, non-medical use, especially when taken without supervision or by improper routes. A single administration under medical supervision does not create problematic use.

## Fentanyl consumption

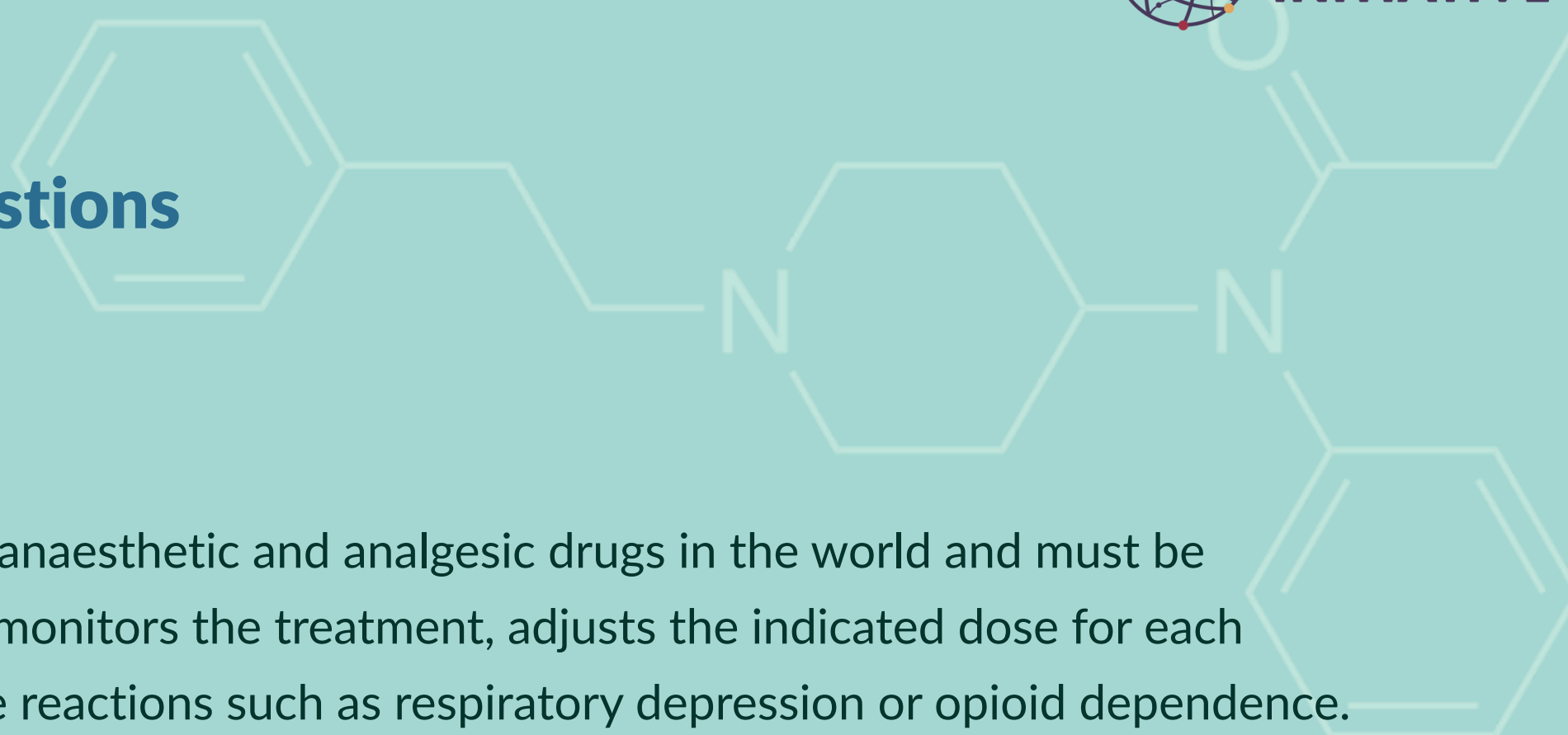
### Will I develop dependence if I use fentanyl once?

No, if you use fentanyl only once, you will not develop a substance use disorder. However, fentanyl is a synthetic opioid that generates tolerance quickly, meaning that to achieve the same effect, your body will require higher doses. It also causes withdrawal symptoms, which, after prolonged use, become stronger. This causes dependence, which can lead to a substance use disorder. Additionally, illegally produced fentanyl, which lacks quality controls, can cause an accidental overdose.





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### Is fentanyl bad?

No, fentanyl is one of the most effective anaesthetic and analgesic drugs in the world and must be administered by a specialist doctor, who monitors the treatment, adjusts the indicated dose for each patient, and ensures there are no adverse reactions such as respiratory depression or opioid dependence. The substance itself is not bad. The unregulated market and lack of public health, gender and human rights-based policies have driven the overdose crisis.



### Can fentanyl kill you?

It depends on the person, their physical constitution and their tolerance to the substance. For some, consuming one milligram of fentanyl may induce sedation and relaxation, while for others it may cause respiratory arrest leading to death. The risk of overdose increases when the user does not know what other substances are mixed with their fentanyl dose, such as xylazine. If a doctor administers fentanyl as anaesthesia or for pain relief, they calculate the exact dose your body needs to avoid respiratory depression.

### Can I get intoxicated if I touch fentanyl?

No, touching fentanyl in pill or powder form will not intoxicate you or cause an overdose leading to death. The one case in which fentanyl can be absorbed through the skin is with a special doctor-prescribed fentanyl skin patch, and even then, it takes hours of exposure.

### Can snorting fentanyl kill you?

Yes, snorting fentanyl can kill you, even with a single dose. Being an extremely potent opioid, a small amount can cause respiratory depression, loss of consciousness and death from overdose. In addition, many times it is consumed unknowingly, as it is mixed with other substances. The risk increases if it is combined with alcohol, benzodiazepines or methamphetamine.

### What does fentanyl smell like?

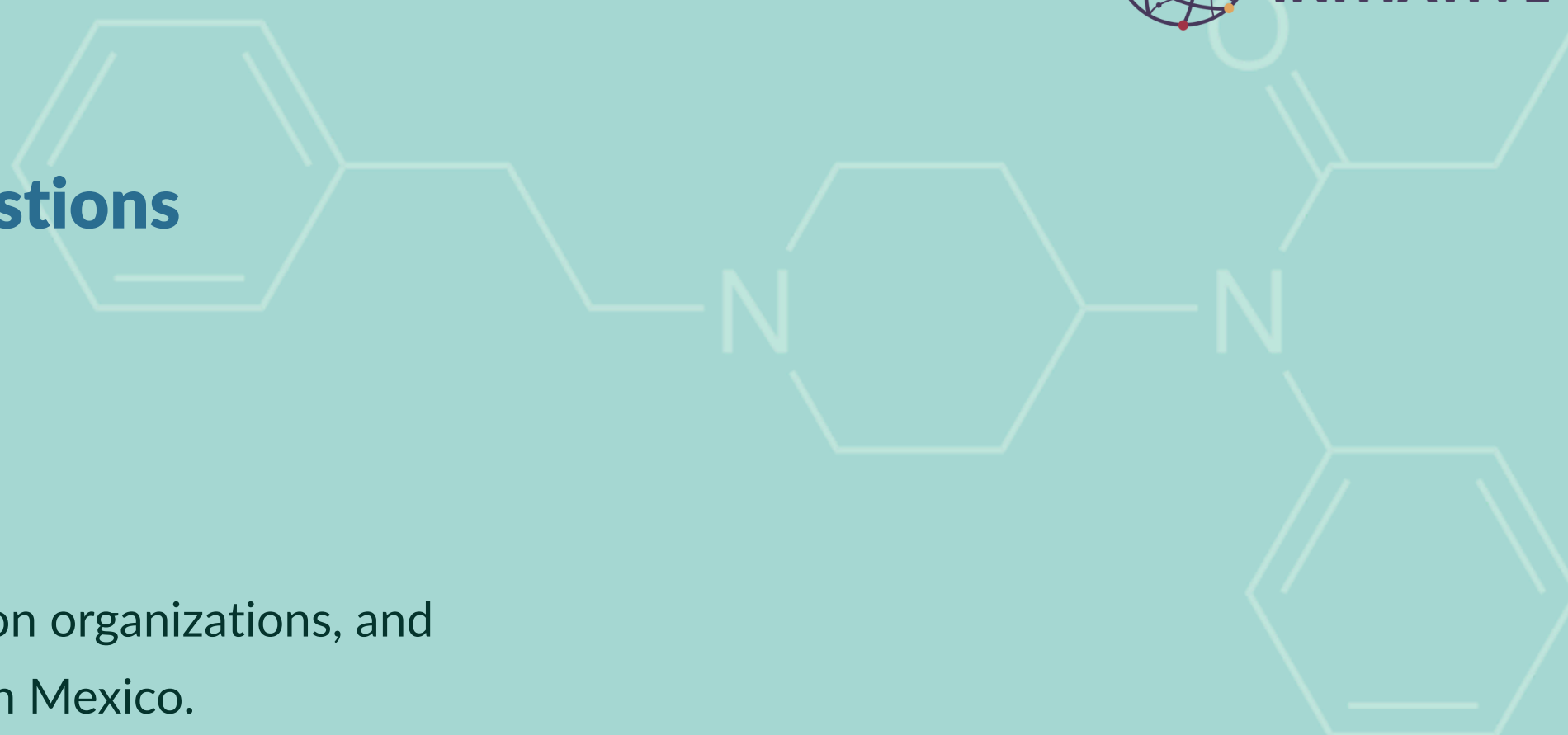
Fentanyl has no noticeable odour. It is an odourless and tasteless substance, making it difficult to detect without chemical testing. For this reason, many people consume it unknowingly, as it is mixed with other substances.

### How can I tell if the drug I use contains fentanyl?

To know if a drug contains fentanyl, you can use test strips that detect its presence in substances or syringe residues.



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These strips

- are inexpensive and easy to use,
- can be obtained through harm reduction organizations, and
- are not freely available in pharmacies in Mexico.

If you do not have access to strips, some indirect signs may be stronger than usual sedative effects or intense withdrawal symptoms, but the safest way is to test the substance (for more on this, see our glossary).

### How long does the effect of fentanyl last?

The effect of fentanyl depends on the route of administration and the quality of the substance. Medical-grade fentanyl differs from that made illicitly. The latter presents considerable risks to users.

- Injected (hospital): onset in 1–2 minutes, lasting 30–60 minutes.
- Transdermal patch (medical): releases the substance slowly over 72 hours.
- Inhaled or smoked (illicit): rapid effect (seconds) and short-lasting, 15–30 minutes.



### Are people who use fentanyl or other drugs criminals?

No. People who use fentanyl or any other substance are not criminals simply for using it. Problematic use should be addressed from a public health perspective rather than being criminalized. However, in Mexico, drug use is often treated as a crime, and people who use substances are stigmatized, making it harder for them to access treatment. Health and human rights organizations in different parts of the country, as well as international organizations, promote a public health and harm reduction approach, rather than punishment, which has proven more effective in protecting communities' health.



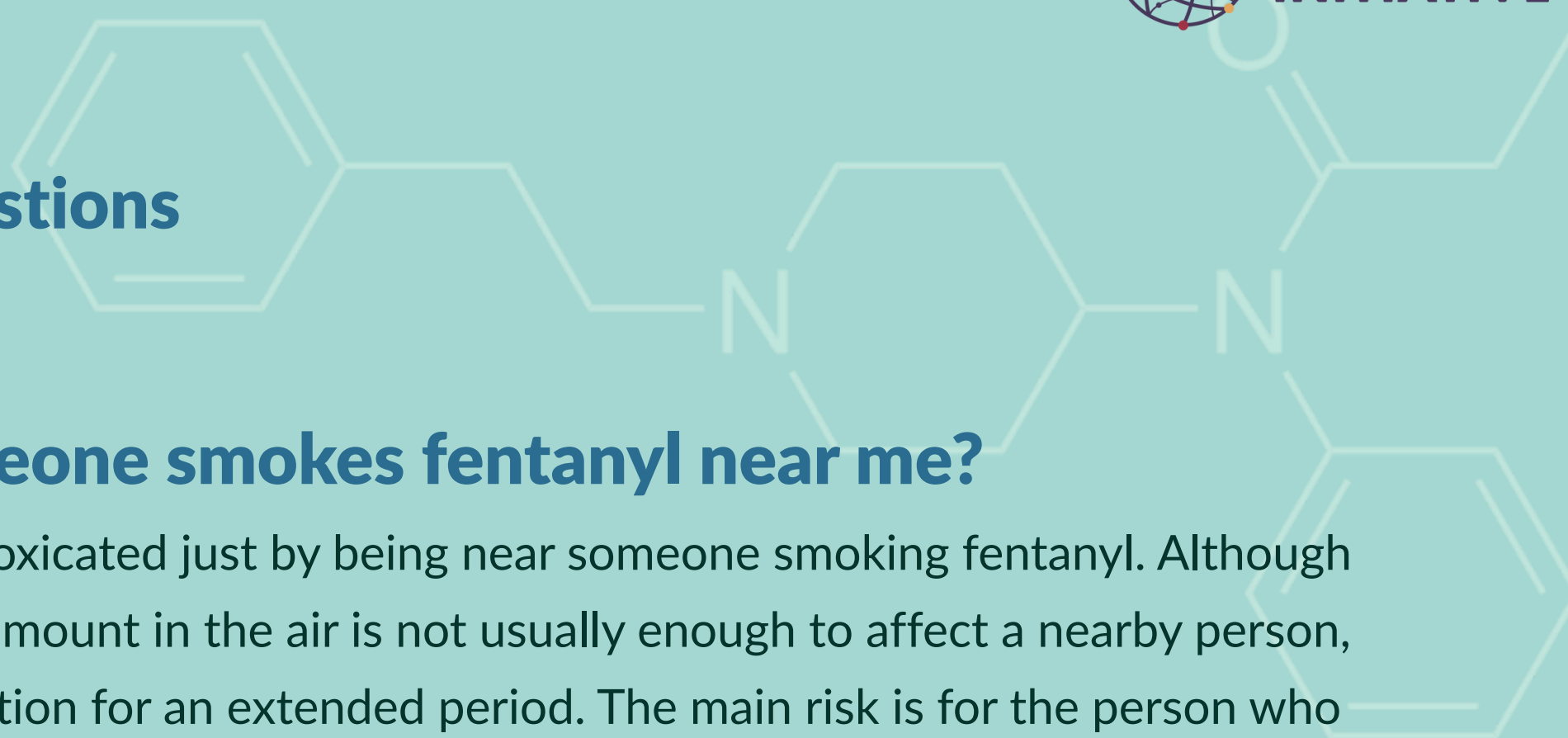
### Why do some media outlets say that fentanyl users look like zombies?

Fentanyl is an opioid that alters how the brain perceives pain and regulates emotional states, creating a sense of relief and intense sedation; that is why people who use fentanyl often appear drowsy. However, the dehumanizing images of people bent over with drooping arms, which earned it the nickname 'zombie drug', are due to a combination of fentanyl and a veterinary tranquilizer called xylazine. Xylazine also causes sedation, suppresses heart and lung function, and is a central nervous system depressant that can cause skin lesions and fainting spells lasting hours. Xylazine tends to prolong and intensify fentanyl's effects and carries significant overdose risks.





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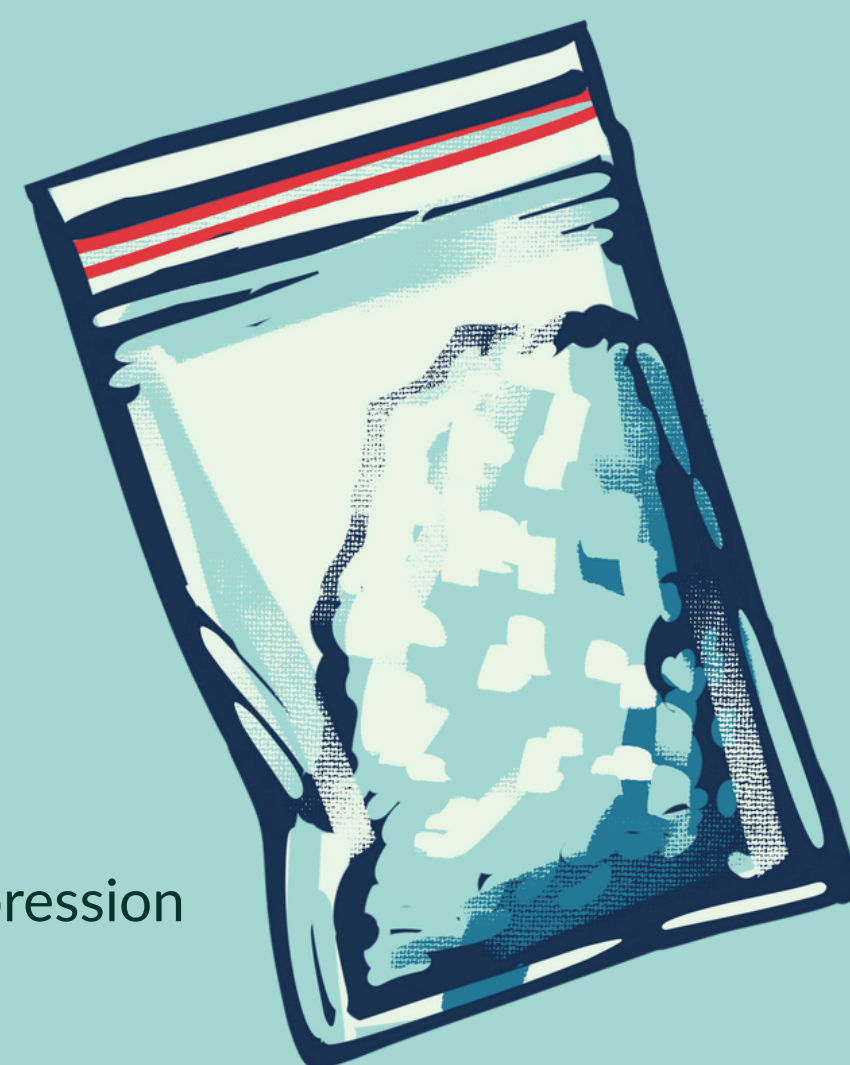
### Can I get intoxicated if someone smokes fentanyl near me?

No, it is very unlikely that you will get intoxicated just by being near someone smoking fentanyl. Although the smoke contains active particles, the amount in the air is not usually enough to affect a nearby person, except in closed spaces with poor ventilation for an extended period. The main risk is for the person who consumes it directly.

### What other substances can fentanyl be mixed with?

Fentanyl is often mixed with other substances, frequently without the user's knowledge. Some common combinations include:

- Methamphetamine (crystal): to 'balance' effects (upper/downer)
- Heroin: enhances the drug and lowers costs
- Cocaine: increases the risk of overdose
- Cannabis: cases of adulteration have been reported
- Benzodiazepines or alcohol: likely a lethal combination due to respiratory depression



### Can the cannabis or meth I consume contain fentanyl?

It depends on where you live and where you buy the substance. In northern Mexico, in places like Baja California and Sinaloa, cannabis, meth, cocaine and other substances adulterated with fentanyl have been detected. Government agencies and organizations working with people with problematic substance use began suspecting adulteration due to the effects users were experiencing, which were not previously associated with these substances. Better data is needed to determine what substances are present in the supply.

## Fentanyl in Mexico

### Is fentanyl a problem in Mexico?

Yes, fentanyl is a growing problem in Mexico, although different from the situation in the United States and Canada. While it is not yet a national crisis, it does pose a public health risk.

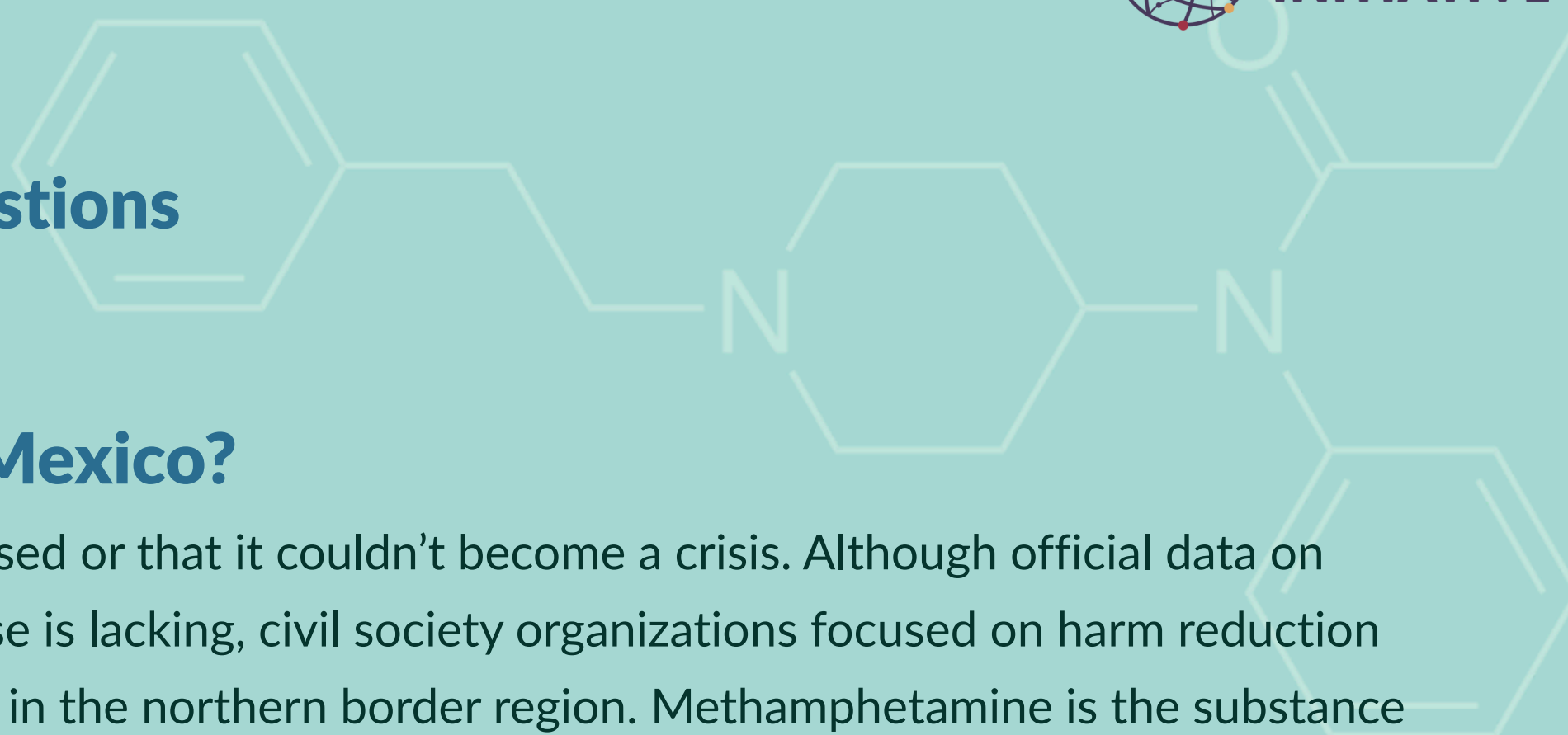
- Its use is concentrated in border cities (Tijuana, Mexicali, Juárez).
- Many people consume it unknowingly, as it's mixed with other substances.
- Overdoses and deaths due to adulteration are increasing.
- There is a shortage of naloxone and few public harm reduction services.







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### Is there a fentanyl crisis in Mexico?

No, but that doesn't mean it isn't being used or that it couldn't become a crisis. Although official data on fentanyl-related deaths or problematic use is lacking, civil society organizations focused on harm reduction report that fentanyl use is more frequent in the northern border region. Methamphetamine is the substance causing the most problematic use among Mexicans due to precarious living conditions and high demand.

### Where is fentanyl most consumed in Mexico?

Current data indicates that its use is mainly concentrated in northern border cities such as Tijuana, Mexicali, Ciudad Juárez and San Luis Río Colorado. These areas have a history of injected heroin use, and fentanyl has either replaced or adulterated that drug. Most people who access harm reduction services in these areas are either deportees from the US or have lived there. In other parts of the country, consumption is often the result of adulterated drugs, such as methamphetamine or cannabis. However, better data is needed to understand where and how fentanyl is consumed in Mexico.

### Do fentanyl seizures reduce violence in affected areas?

There is no evidence that seizures lead to a reduction in violence. On the contrary, Sinaloa – one of the states with the highest number of fentanyl seizures since 2021 – is also one of the states where violence affecting citizens has not decreased.

### Can fentanyl be made in a home kitchen?

Yes, fentanyl can be produced in a regular kitchen. Fentanyl available on the unregulated market is produced in clandestine laboratories known as 'kitchens', which are often set up in homes and use chemical precursors obtained online. This makes it easy to produce, hard to detect and very risky due to the lack of dosage control. However, despite its relatively simple production process, there are risks for those synthesizing it if biosafety measures are not followed.

### What names are used for fentanyl?

Names vary by region and context. Some commonly used names include:

- Fenta
- China White (when mixed with heroin)
- Blue pill (when in fake tablet form)
- M30 (from the imprint on some pills)
- Zombie drug (when combined with other sedatives)







## Frequently asked questions about fentanyl

### What is the current drug use problem in Mexico?

The main problem is methamphetamine.

- It is the most widely consumed substance in the country, even among children as young as 8–10 years old.
- It is cheap, has intense effects and is highly addictive.
- It is the main reason for admissions to treatment centres.

### Where to seek help

### What to do in case of a fentanyl overdose?

If you are in the US, Mexico or Canada, call 911, emergency services, or seek help from a civil organization or public agency that provides naloxone – a safe and fast-acting medication that reverses opioid overdoses, including fentanyl. However, in Mexico and other countries, naloxone is a controlled substance. In the meantime, if you know first aid, you can help the person by performing manual CPR or using a manual breathing bag if available. You should also place the person on their side to prevent choking and try to keep them awake.

### How can I tell if someone using fentanyl is overdosing?

They may become extremely drowsy or lose consciousness, and their pupils may shrink to pinpoint size.

They may also begin to have trouble breathing, which becomes slow or shallow, often accompanied by gurgling sounds similar to a balloon deflating or gas escaping. They will also feel physically weak, their pulse will slow down, and their lips and nails will turn blue or purple. Their body will also become cold and sweaty.

### Is there an antidote for fentanyl?

Yes, the antidote for fentanyl is naloxone. Naloxone reverses the effects of opioid overdose, such as respiratory depression. It can be administered intramuscularly, intravenously or nasally.

However, in Mexico, it is not freely available, and many organizations obtain it through foreign donations.

