



# County of Santa Cruz

## HEALTH SERVICES AGENCY

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### Public Health Division

## PUBLIC HEALTH ADVISORY

<b>To:</b> Schools, after school programs, PTA's organizations serving youth
<b>From:</b> Gail Newel, MD, MPH, County Public Health Officer
<b>Subject:</b> Opioid Overdoses from Fake Pills
<b>Date:</b> September 27, 2019

You may have recently seen a “public health warning” regarding fake pills containing the powerful and deadly fentanyl. We are writing to provide additional information, guidance and context. These counterfeit pills have been found in neighboring Santa Clara and Monterey Counties. The following memo provides information about naloxone and guidance on talking with youth.

### Why is this important?

Fentanyl is a very powerful opioid drug — 80-100 times more powerful than morphine — and exposure to even small amounts can cause overdose and death. The County Medical Examiner has reported 44 opioid deaths\* from January 1, 2019 to August 31, 2019. Of the 44 deaths, 11 have involved fentanyl, including those of a 15 and 16-year-old. Several of these deaths have been linked to these fake pills containing the chemical fentanyl, made to look like a 30 mg oxycodone prescription pill (Percocet®). People who took these pills thinking they were taking oxycodone were unaware that they were taking lethal doses of fentanyl.

### What are fake pills?

Many opioid pills are now made by counterfeiting organizations. These pills are not prescribed, stolen, or resold by or from verified pharmaceutical companies, and there is no connection between their appearance and their ingredients. They are fake pills made to look like real prescription medications.

No one should take a pill that was not obtained directly from a pharmacy. Pills given by a friend or bought from others also should not be taken. Doing so could have deadly consequences.

### What actions should I take?

Know the signs and symptoms that might indicate an opioid overdose. Signs and symptoms may include nodding off, falling asleep in class, droopy eyes, pinpoint pupils, appearing “zoned out,” barely being able to stay awake, constipation, etc. A person who has these symptoms from stress or sleep deprivation will be able to wake up; a person who has overdosed will not.

There is a drug called naloxone (also known by its brand name, Narcan®), which can reverse the effects of an opioid overdose. It is usually available as a nasal or injectable medication. When given during an overdose, naloxone can restore breathing within 2-8 minutes.

California state regulations permit pharmacists to prescribe naloxone without a prescription. Pharmacists are required to provide counseling and education for anyone trying to obtain naloxone. Contact a pharmacy to confirm that they have naloxone available.

## What can I say to young people?

Remember the main messages to young people are:

- Fake pills can kill.
- Do not take a pill that you (or a parent/guardian filling a prescription for you) did not get directly from a pharmacy.
- Do not take pills given to you by a friend.
- Do not buy pills from your friends or other people.
- FAKE pills look like real pills, but they can be deadly.

Please share this Health Advisory widely. Thank you.

## Where can I get more information?

For general information on the opioid epidemic:

- [cdc.gov/opioids](https://www.cdc.gov/opioids)
- [hhs.gov/opioids/about-the-epidemic](https://www.hhs.gov/opioids/about-the-epidemic)

For more information on fake pills:

- [safemedicines.org/policymakers-media/fentanyl-pills-ravaging-american-communities](https://www.safemedicines.org/policymakers-media/fentanyl-pills-ravaging-american-communities)



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**Santa Cruz County**

**Health Alert:** conveys the highest level of importance; warrants immediate action or attention.

**Health Advisory:** provides important information for a specific incident or situation; may not require immediate action.

**Health Update:** provides updated information regarding an incident or situation; unlikely to require immediate action.