

Fentanyl Overdose and Death: Teens are at Risk, Keep your 'Ohana Safe

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We've all heard the alarm bells ringing about Fentanyl. Images of brightly colored pills called Rainbow Fentanyl warn that your keiki may be at risk, and it's hard to know what to believe or how to keep your 'ohana safe.

Members of the Hawai'i Island Fentanyl Taskforce are here to help keep our community informed of the very real risks of fentanyl, and to share information as we see an alarming increase in dangerous overdoses particularly among teens and young adults.

Fentanyl is a strong opioid for medical use that is now being illegally manufactured as a deadly recreational drug. It's up to 100 times stronger than other opioids and is incredibly dangerous. Drug dealers often sell fentanyl as fake oxycodone, and it is increasingly found in other illegally produced fake pills including drugs that look like Adderall or Vicodin.

Gary Yabuta, Hawai'i's High Intensity Drug Trafficking Area (HIDTA) Executive Director warned in a September release that "I want the public to be careful and make sure that they understand that there's something out there in the streets that can be lethal."

According to CDC data, **one person dies of an overdose on Hawai'i island every 11 days.**

The Hawai'i Island Fentanyl Taskforce was founded in 2021 following conversations between providers at Hawai'i Island Community Health Center (HICHC) and the Mayor's office. Now entering its second year, the taskforce has representation from the Mayor's office, HPD, HFD, Department of Education, treatment providers, and healthcare professionals.

Together they aim to raise awareness around fentanyl and help combat the major epidemic that is hitting hard right here on Hawai'i island: the opioid-fentanyl drug crisis. There is much work to be done, and all sectors of our community are needed. As Task Force member Uncle Wally Lau states: "to succeed, this must be a kakou effort."

Overdose deaths among teenagers in the United States have never been higher, even though fewer teens are using drugs. Researchers at the University of California report the overdose rate among school aged children in the US doubled between 2019 and 2020, and rose an additional 20% last year. Fentanyl, mixed into other drugs, is likely the culprit.

The taskforce is working to share information directly to the community and in schools with talk story sessions island wide. In the words of taskforce leader, Dr. Kimo Alameda, "*We found that it's not enough to tell kids not to use dangerous drugs. **A better approach is to replace the word "No" with "Know" because, "if they know, they may not go."** Knowledge is power and for youth, knowing can be a superpower.*"

The most important thing to know is that with fentanyl on the rise, **no street or recreational drugs are safe**. Teens are at a time in life when they might be tempted to experiment, but they live in a world where one risky decision could be fatal.

One important tool to be aware of is the overdose reversal medication naloxone, also known as Narcan. Narcan is available in the form of a nasal spray, and can easily be used by anyone to reverse an opioid overdose.

In his September release, Gary Yabuta stated that every household should have Narcan in their medicine cabinet. You can get a free Narcan nasal inhaler in the mail from the Hawaii Health and Harm Reduction Center (H3RC), just go to www.hhhrc.org/overdose to learn more.

You can help spread community awareness by scheduling an information talk story for your group, organization, or school by contacting (808) 965-3083.

Community First is a 501 (c) 3 non-profit founded by the late Barry Taniguchi in 2014 to serve as a neutral forum for the community to come together, and as a catalyst for solutions to improve health and access to health care. Through its programs, Community First hopes to shift the model of healthcare from reactively treating disease, to proactively caring for the health of every person on Hawai'i Island. For more information, please visit our website at www.communityfirsthawaii.org or Facebook and Instagram pages at [@communityfirsthawaii](https://www.facebook.com/communityfirsthawaii).