
Opioids: The Basics of Street Drugs

Introduction

The global supply of illicit opioids is rapidly shifting and unstable. Fentanyl went from being an occasional contaminant to nearly completely taking over street opioids in the span of just a few years. More often than not, patients obtain different opioid drugs from a variety of sources. Depending on what is available at a given time, the same person may be sniffing, smoking, injecting, or swallowing different varieties of opioids, some illegal (such as heroin), some legal but illicitly obtained (such as OxyContin), and some legal drugs that were manufactured illicitly (such as fentanyl). In this fact sheet, we introduce you to the landscape of street opioids in order to help you understand what your patients are using and allow you to speak their language.

Heroin

- **Basics:** A prodrug of morphine, heroin is a natural product manufactured from poppy plants most commonly grown in Southern Asia and Central America. For decades, it was the dominant illicit opioid available on the street, until it was overtaken by fentanyl in recent years. Heroin can come in various forms, most commonly a white powder, a brown powder, or a black sticky substance called “black tar.”
- **Street names:** Dope, H, smack, junk, snow, China white, black tar, brown; also known as speed ball when mixed with cocaine.
- **How it's obtained:** Street dealers sell heroin in small plastic or paper bags, each of which is supposed to contain a single dose. The actual amount of heroin per bag varies from as little as 25 mg to as much as 100 mg. Ten bags make up a “bundle,” and five bundles make up a “brick.”
- **How it's used:** Injected, smoked, sniffed, or administered subcutaneously (“skin popping”).
- **Cost:** One bag typically costs \$10–\$20.
- **Average daily use:** Varies significantly, but a typical daily dose for someone who uses heroin might be 100–500 mg or more, divided into multiple doses throughout the day.

Fentanyl

- **Basics:** Fentanyl is a powerful synthetic opioid commonly used for the treatment of perioperative and chronic pain. When sold on the street, however, it is rarely pharmaceutical-grade medication. Instead, it is an illegally manufactured product, usually from China, that is smuggled into the country. Quality control is very poor—thus “fentanyl” often contains impurities and can be mixed with highly potent structural analogues such as carfentanil and sufentanil. Illicit fentanyl has nearly completely overtaken the drug market—it is found in almost all illicit opioids and as contaminants in non-opioid drugs like cocaine and amphetamines.
- **Street names:** Crazy one, dragon's breath, great bear, goodfella, poison.
- **How it's obtained:** Typically sold in the same manner as heroin (in single-dose bags) or as counterfeit pills.
- **How it's used:** Pharmaceutical fentanyl can be taken intravenously, as a transdermal patch (which is sometimes chewed or smoked), and as a lozenge. Illicit fentanyl is used intravenously, sniffed, swallowed, or smoked.
- **Cost:** A 2020 study found that prices for fentanyl are 10–20 times cheaper than heroin (Broadhurst R et al, *Trends and Issues in Crime and Criminal Justice* 2020;590:1–14), which explains its rise in the illicit marketplace. Bags of fentanyl are sold for a few dollars apiece; patches cost approximately \$50 apiece.
- **Average daily use:** Difficult to estimate, but a typical user might use 50–200 mcg or more, divided into multiple doses throughout the day.

Oxycodone/OxyContin/Percocet

- **Basics:** OxyContin, the long-acting formulation of oxycodone, is a semi-synthetic prescription opioid introduced in 1996. The high doses contained within a single pill, intranasal bioavailability, and aggressive marketing campaign have been cited as supercharging the “first wave” of the opioid epidemic. Cheap and widely available heroin eventually replaced OxyContin as the main driver of opioid-related morbidity and mortality in the late 2000s once prescriptions were dialed back. Oxycodone and OxyContin are less commonly seen on the streets these days, though they are still available. Percocet is branded oxycodone co-formulated with acetaminophen.
- **Street names:** Oxy, roxy, OC, greenies, perc, hillbilly heroin.
- **How it's obtained:** Tablets on the street originate from one of two sources. Some are actual pharmaceutical-grade tablets. Others are counterfeits. These “pressed pills” can be nearly indistinguishable from the real thing but contain dangerous amounts of contaminants, often fentanyl or fentanyl analogues.
- **How it's used:** Swallowed or sniffed.
- **Cost:** Individual tablets sell for \$5–\$20 apiece or more.

- *Average daily use:* A typical daily dose for an oxycodone user might be 20–240 mg or more, divided into multiple doses throughout the day.

Other Prescription Opioids

- *Basics:* Although OxyContin has been assigned much of the blame for driving the early opioid epidemic, other prescription opioid analgesics had a part to play as well. Fentanyl is more commonly found on the streets, but various opioid analgesics can still be purchased. The specific agents available vary by geography and tend to shift over time, but as with OxyContin, counterfeit “pressed pills” containing potentially lethal doses of fentanyl remain a constant danger.
- *Specific agents:*
 - Hydromorphone (Dilaudid, Exalgo): known as smack, juice, D, dillies, footballs.
 - Hydrocodone/acetaminophen (Vicodin): known as vikes, hydro, banana, fluff.
 - Oxycodone (Opana): known as Mrs. O, O-bomb, octagon, biscuits.
 - Morphine (MS Contin): known as morpho, M, Miss Emma, monkey.
 - Codeine/acetaminophen (Tylenol #3, Tylenol #4): known as T3, T4.
 - Codeine: known as Cody, Captain Cody, little C.
 - Codeine/promethazine syrup (typically mixed with soda): known as purple drank, Texas tea, sizzurp.
 - Meperidine (Demerol): known as demmies, dillies, D.
- *How they're used:* Typically swallowed or sniffed.
- *Cost:* Varies by agent and geographic region, anywhere from a few dollars to \$50+ per dose.