



# County of Santa Cruz

## HEALTH SERVICES AGENCY

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PUBLIC HEALTH DIVISION

### PUBLIC HEALTH ALERT

#### Opioid Overdoses in Santa Cruz Caused by Counterfeit “Xanax” Pill Containing Fentanyl

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| <b>To:</b>   | <b>All Healthcare Providers</b>                             |
| <b>From:</b> | <b>Lisa B. Hernandez, Health Officer, Santa Cruz County</b> |
| <b>Date:</b> | <b>November 4, 2015</b>                                     |

### CURRENT SITUATION

The Sheriff’s Office received information that a counterfeit version of the prescription drug alprazolam is being sold on the street in Santa Cruz County. Alprazolam is a benzodiazepine with brand names that include Niravam and Xanax. This street alprazolam may be linked to two recent overdose deaths. Alprazolam is a medication used to treat anxiety disorders, panic disorders and anxiety caused by depression.

On October 24<sup>th</sup>, 2015, two Watsonville men ingested what they thought was “Xanax” at a party. They both experienced a medical emergency and were sent to Watsonville Community Hospital. One of the men, a 19 years old, was placed on life support and later died on October 30<sup>th</sup>. On October 27<sup>th</sup>, a 29 year old man consumed what he believed to be “Xanax” and was found deceased in his home the following day. Autopsies and toxicology results are pending in both cases. San Francisco and Contra Costa have also recently experienced similar overdoses related to street “Xanax” possibly laced with Fentanyl, an opioid medication.

### BACKGROUND

The Santa Cruz County Health Services Agency Public Health Division is warning people not to purchase “Xanax” on the street, as there are counterfeit pills circulating that contain fentanyl. Fentanyl is an extremely potent, short-acting opioid that can cause overdose and death.

Although pharmaceutical fentanyl can be diverted for misuse, most cases of fentanyl-related morbidity and mortality have been linked to illicitly manufactured fentanyl and fentanyl analogs, collectively referred to as non-pharmaceutical fentanyl (NPF). NPF is sold via illicit drug markets for its heroin-like effect and often mixed with heroin and/or cocaine as a combination product – with or without the user’s knowledge – to increase its euphoric effects.



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For people who do purchase prescription drugs on the street, or who are exposed to opioids, the Public Health Division encourages them to have access to naloxone to combat overdose. Naloxone is a short-acting opioid antagonist that is sprayed intranasally or injected to reverse an overdose including heroin and fentanyl, and is a critical tool in preventing fatal opioid overdoses. While NPF-related overdoses can be reversed with naloxone, a higher dose or multiple number of doses per overdose event may be required to revive a patient due to the high potency of NPF. Naloxone is not a controlled substance and can be prescribed by any licensed health care provider, and can be administered by witnesses as a first aid measure. These means of naloxone provision and use are protected by California law (AB635 and AB1535).

Counterfeit “Xanax” on red background. Real Xanax on grey background.



### **ACTIONS REQUESTED OF ALL CLINICIANS**

Inform your patients NOT to purchase or consume any medication or substance provided from friends, acquaintances or strangers.

Recognize and treat opioid overdose patients, with particular focus on how to respond to fentanyl and acetyl fentanyl overdose.

### **ADDITIONAL RESOURCES**

- *CDC Health Advisory: Recommendations for Laboratory Testing for Acetyl Fentanyl and Patient Evaluation and Treatment for Overdose with Synthetic Opioid* at <http://emergency.cdc.gov/han/han00350.asp>
- DEA Issues Nationwide Alert on Fentanyl as Threat to Health and Public Safety at <http://www.dea.gov/divisions/hq/2015/hq031815.shtml>
- *Fentanyl SAMHSA letter to physicians* and fact sheet at: <http://buprenorphine.samhsa.gov/20130715114030811.pdf>
- *Special Report: Opiates and Related Drugs Reported in NFLIS, 2009-2014* at [http://www.deadiversion.usdoj.gov/nflis/spec\\_rpt\\_opioids\\_2014.pdf](http://www.deadiversion.usdoj.gov/nflis/spec_rpt_opioids_2014.pdf)
- *SAMHSA Opioid Overdose Toolkit* at: [http://store.samhsa.gov/shin/content/SMA13-4742/Overdose\\_Toolkit\\_2014\\_Jan.pdf](http://store.samhsa.gov/shin/content/SMA13-4742/Overdose_Toolkit_2014_Jan.pdf)
- Call Poison Control at 1-800-222-1222 or use the [webPOISONCONTROL®](#) online tool for guidance

**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.



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