

First Responder Safety Tips: Opioid Exposure

Law enforcement and first responders are likely to encounter illicit drugs during routine day-to-day job duties. Many times, the identity of the drugs encountered is unknown prior to field/lab testing. The use of opioid drugs in particular are on the rise, and synthetic opioids such as fentanyl and carfentanil are becoming increasingly more prevalent and have been found to lace other illicit drugs such as heroin, cocaine, and methamphetamines. Exposure to these opioids can be life threatening.

Potential Exposures

Illicit drugs can come in powder, pill, or liquid forms. First responders can come into contact by:

- Inhalation
- Ingestion
- Touching eyes, nose, or mouth with contaminated hands/gloves
- Absorbed by the skin
- Needle stick

Safety Precautions

- Avoid handling any substances or paraphernalia, if possible.
- Assume all unknown powdered drugs may contain fentanyl or its analogs.
- Notify everyone in proximity of the potential presence of a dangerous drug.
- Do not taste, touch, or smell suspected drugs of any kind.
- If you are alone, notify someone to ensure your safety is monitored.
- Ensure naloxone is **immediately available** for use.
- Perform risk assessments at every scene to determine exposure risk.
- Always wear nitrile gloves when illicit drugs may be present and change them properly when they become contaminated.
- Wear respiratory protection if powdered drugs are visible or suspected.
- Avoid performing tasks that may cause illicit drugs to become airborne.
- Do not touch the eyes, nose, or mouth after touching any surface that may be contaminated, even if wearing gloves.
- Wash hands with soap and water after working in an area that may be contaminated, even if gloves were worn. Do not use hand sanitizer or bleach.

