

While fentanyl has legitimate medical uses, the version responsible for many overdoses is illicitly manufactured. Illicitly

produced fentanyl is often mixed with other drugs, such as heroin or cocaine, without the user's knowledge, leading to increased risks. It can be found in various forms, including powder, pills, and patches.

The misuse and abuse of fentanyl have contributed significantly to the opioid crisis. In the year 2022, the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) confiscated over 50 million counterfeit prescription pills and over 10,000 pounds of fentanyl in the US.

Furthermore, from 2015 to 2021, the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reported a 7.5 fold surge in overdose fatalities linked to synthetic opioids, notably the potent fentanyl.

China's anti-fentanyl measures

China maintains stringent anti-drug policies within its borders, and in November last year, Chinese President Xi Jinping committed to tightening control over the legal trade of fentanyl in a summit with US President Joe Biden.



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However, detractors in the United States argue that China falls short in actively monitoring or regulating transactions involving Chinese-made ingredients, which are used by buyers to produce illegal drugs overseas.

"We know that the global fentanyl supply chain, which ends with the deaths of Americans, often starts with chemical companies in China," said Attorney General Merrick B. Garland.

He made this comment in October last year when the US Justice Department unveiled eight indictments in Florida, charging China-based companies and their employees with crimes related to fentanyl and methamphetamine production, synthetic opioid distribution, and sales involving precursor chemicals.

These indictments follow previous prosecutions announced in June 2023 and constitute the second wave of legal actions against China-based chemical manufacturing entities and individuals from the People's Republic of China for trafficking fentanyl precursor chemicals into the United States.

"The United States government is focused on breaking apart every link in that chain, getting fentanyl out of our communities, and bringing those who put it there to justice," Garland said.



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Fentanyl crisis resolution

But collaboration between the United States and China in the anti-drug realm has been fraught with obstacles in the past. In 2019, Beijing intensified its efforts to combat the production and sale of finalised fentanyl and its derivatives, but disagreements with the US arose on trade, human rights, the Covid-19 outbreak, and the Taiwan issue, leading to a stall in progress.

Tuesday's US-China talks may potentially bring a clearer way forward to addressing this dire public-health challenge.

Approximately 100,000 individuals succumb to fentanyl overdose annually, making it the primary cause of death among those aged 18 to 49. In individuals aged 19 and under, overdoses and poisonings rank as the third leading cause of death in the US.

ABOUT KATJA HAMILTON

Katja is the Finance, Property and Healthcare Editor at Bizcommunity.

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