Opioid Prevention Program: Data to Action
Overdose Deaths Involving Cocaine With and Without Opioids in New York State, 2010-2019

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Introduction

The number of overdose deaths involving cocaine has been increasing in New York State (NYS) since 2010. According to national survey data, reported cocaine use in the past month remained steady for the US from 2015-2016 to 2017-2018, but increased among New Yorkers.[1] The same survey data show that, in 2017-2018, 69.3 percent of NYS respondents reported perceiving great risk from using cocaine once a month. Except for a small decrease in 2018, overdose deaths involving cocaine in NYS have increased annually from 2013 to 2019. This includes deaths that were determined to have been caused by an overdose and where cocaine was listed on the death certificate as one of the contributing causes.[2] Examining the increase in overdose deaths involving cocaine more closely, the presence of fentanyl is also found on many of the deaths certificates, demonstrating that opioids have been driving this increase. This report describes the data, discusses next steps for public health efforts and harm reduction measures, and offers resources and recommended actions aimed at informing the public and reducing overdose death.

What is cocaine?

Cocaine is a stimulant that can produce feelings of alertness or euphoria when snorted (inhaled), smoked, or injected. This illicit substance is addictive and can be found in powder or rock form ("crack"), and in coca leaves.[3,4] Illegal for recreational use or possession in the United States, its use can lead to decreased appetite, paranoia, and even cardiac arrest. Some people use cocaine by itself, while others use cocaine in combination with other substances, such as alcohol or opioids.[5]

Trends in overdose deaths involving cocaine

Figure 1 shows that the number of overdose deaths involving cocaine in NYS increased from 2010 to 2019. During the first five-year period, there was about a 30 percent increase from 388 overdose deaths in 2010 to 503 in 2014. Over the next five years, the number of overdose deaths involving cocaine increased to 1,320 in 2019 — a 240 percent increase from 2010. In light of the ongoing opioid overdose crisis and widespread presence of fentanyl in the street drug market,[6] this steady increase warrants a closer look.

Role of opioids in overdose deaths involving cocaine

Previous studies have shown that cocaine use is also common among people who use heroin.[7] In recent years, heroin has largely been replaced by or tainted with illicitly manufactured fentanyl, a highly potent opioid with an increased risk of overdose.[8] For these reasons, it is helpful to review the number of overdose deaths involving cocaine *with* and *without* the involvement of fentanyl.[9] Shown in Figure 1, the number of overdose deaths involving cocaine *without* synthetic opioids other than methadone (SOOTM) remained stable from 2014 to 2019. However, during the

Figure 1

Overdose deaths involving cocaine with and without synthetic opioids (other than methadone)*, New York State, 2010-2019

Legend:
- Overdose deaths involving cocaine (T40.5)
- Overdose deaths involving cocaine (T40.5), with SOOTM (T40.4)
- Overdose deaths involving cocaine (T40.5), without SOOTM (T40.4)
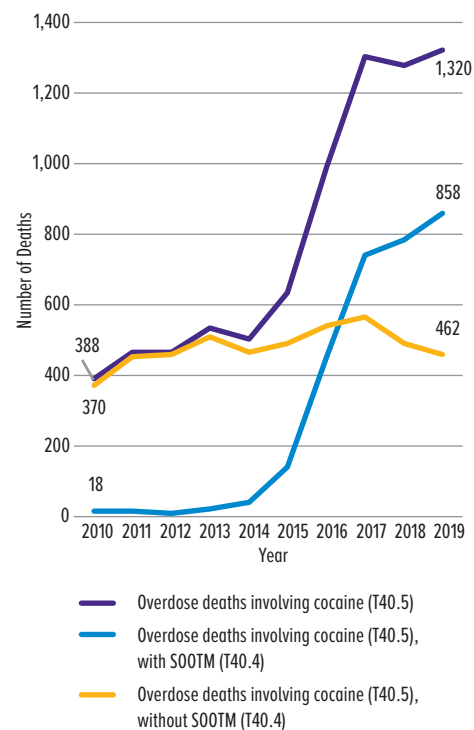
Note: SOOTM (T40.4) is a proxy for fentanyl

*Synthetic opioids other than methadone (SOOTM) are identified by ICD-10 code T40.4 and serve as a proxy for fentanyl, which is a highly potent opioid now commonly found in the illicit drug market.

Note: Cocaine overdose is identified by ICD-10 code T40.5. "Synthetic opioids other than methadone" (SOOTM) includes ~90% fentanyl since 2015. Counts are suppressed for categories with fewer than 10 deaths.

Data source: CDC WONDER; Accessed January 2021

same time period, the number of deaths involving cocaine *with* SOOTM (mostly illicit fentanyl) increased by more than 2,000 percent, from 38 deaths in 2014 to 858 deaths in 2019. This indicates the increase in overdose deaths involving cocaine has been driven by the presence of opioids, specifically fentanyl. Similar trends are being observed in New York City[10] and across the country.[11]

Interpretation and next steps

The data show that the presence of fentanyl has contributed largely to the increase in overdose deaths involving cocaine in NYS since 2014. Some people who use drugs may be intending to use opioids and cocaine together (i.e., speed-balling) or alternatingly, or they may be only intending to use cocaine.[12,13] There is widespread evidence that cocaine may be contaminated with fentanyl.[14] Public health efforts should be aimed at raising awareness about the risk of opioid overdose in conjunction with cocaine use. Harm reduction education and training should be provided to people who use cocaine.

These factors highlight the need for awareness about and access to naloxone, even among people who use cocaine but not necessarily opioids.[15] Naloxone is a medication that can reverse the effects of an opioid overdose, when administered in time. Being trained on how to identify an overdose that involves opioids and administer naloxone can save a life. People who use cocaine with or without opioids may consider safer use practices to reduce their risk of overdose, or may reduce or stop their use. Treatment and recovery options are available, as well. See the following list of recommended actions and resources to learn more.

Recommended Actions and Resources

The following list of recommendations is tailored to specific audiences and is not exhaustive.

For more information about resources for people who use drugs in New York State, please visit https://www.health.ny.gov/opioids, or contact opioidprevention@health.ny.gov.

Actions:

- *Healthcare providers*
  - Provide stigma-free care by withholding judgment about patients' substance use and becoming trained in cultural competency. The NYSDOH AIDS Institute provides clinical guidelines on best practices.
  - Review this guidance on cocaine and simulants from the NYS Office of Addiction Services and Supports (OASAS).
  - Help promote the Naloxone Co-payment Assistance Program (N-CAP), which allows individuals with prescription coverage to get naloxone at pharmacies with N-CAP covering co-payments up to $40.
  - Become licensed to prescribe buprenorphine for the treatment of opioid use disorder.
  - Review the Provider Resources listed in the New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene's Cocaine Action Kit, including how to talk to patients about cocaine use and overdose prevention.
- *State and local health departments*
  - Educate community members that cocaine may be mixed with fentanyl. Explain the serious health risks associated with opioids, including overdose, coma, and/or death, and the potential consequences of using these drugs together.
  - Opioid Overdose Educational Materials are available from the NYS Department of Health at no cost to you.
  - Learn how to become a registered Opioid Overdose Prevention Program in New York State.

- *Community and family members*
  - Naloxone (also known by the brand name, Narcan) is a drug that can be used in an emergency to reverse overdoses involving opioids. It is legal to possess in New York State. Because substances may contain opioids without the users' knowledge, anyone using drugs should have naloxone available and know how to use it.
  - Check the Community Calendar of Opioid Overdose Trainings for an opioid prevention training near you. Learn how to identify and respond to an opioid overdose and be trained in how to administer naloxone.
  - Learn about the Naloxone Co-payment Assistance Program (N-CAP), which allows people with prescription coverage as part of their health insurance plan to get naloxone at pharmacies, with N-CAP covering co-payments up to $40.
  - Learn about and share these Facts about the 911 Good Samaritan Law, which provides protection to people calling 911 for help in the event of a suspected overdose.

Resources:

- *Treatment and recovery resources*
  - New Yorkers struggling with a substance use disorder can find help and hope by calling the state's toll-free, 24-hour, 7-day-a-week HOPEline at 1-877-8-HOPENY (1-877-846-7369), or by texting HOPENY (Short Code 467369).
  - Learn about treatment options for cocaine.
  - To locate a substance use disorder treatment program, visit the New York State OASAS Treatment Availability Dashboard.
  - For help with an opioid use disorder, learn more about buprenorphine.

- *Comprehensive programs and services for people who use drugs*
  - No matter what drug or drugs you use, reduce your risk of overdose by building a safety plan and sharing it with someone you trust.
  - Follow these strategies when using cocaine to reduce your risk of harm, whether snorting, smoking, or injecting.
  - Learn more about the signs and symptoms of cocaine and other stimulant overdose, or "over-amping", how to reduce risk, and how to respond.
  - Learn the "411" about fentanyl, why it may increase your risk of overdose, why it is important to be cautious of all drugs and not just opioids, and how you can reduce that risk.
  - Visit the New York State Department of Health website to learn about Drug User Health, including helpful information and resources, such as Syringe Access Programs and Drug User Health Hubs.
  - To help locate Syringe Exchange Programs (SEPs), Expanded Syringe Access Programs (ESAPs), Safe Sharps Disposal, Naloxone, and Hepatitis C testing in New York State, visit "The Point".
  - Check for more safety planning and overdose prevention resources provided in the New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene's Cocaine Action Kit.

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