



September 22, 2023

Dear Tribal Leader and Urban Indian Organization Leader:

I am writing to provide you with information in response to the ongoing opioid epidemic affecting American Indian and Alaska Native communities, and the increasing threat from fentanyl and xylazine.

In April 2023, the White House Office of National Drug Policy designated fentanyl combined with xylazine an emerging threat. Then on July 11, 2023, the White House released the National Response Plan to address the emerging threat of fentanyl combined with xylazine. This plan outlines the response and action steps that the Federal Government is taking, and recognizes the need for a “whole-of-society” approach in order to save lives.

Fentanyl is a potent opioid that greatly increases the risk of overdose and unintentional death. Fentanyl can be added to other illegal substances without knowledge by the person using those substances. As a result, an amount of the substance that is expected to be “safe,” becomes extremely dangerous.

Xylazine, a medication designed as a veterinary sedative, is being distributed illicitly for human use and is often mixed with fentanyl, other prescription opioids, or illicit opioids in an effort to lengthen or enhance euphoric effects. Symptoms of exposure to xylazine often mimic those associated with opioids, including sleepiness, slowed breathing, reduced blood pressure and heart rate, small pupils, and high blood glucose levels. It is associated with significant and rapidly worsening negative health consequences, including fatal overdoses and severe morbidity.

In recent months, the number of overdose deaths linked to xylazine has been on the rise. Prompt response with naloxone continues to be the best practice to save lives, but additional measures may be necessary to support breathing and mitigate harm.

Harm Reduction is a term that describes a comprehensive approach to reducing the negative effects of substance use. It may include access to naloxone, syringe service programs, and drug checking equipment. One strategy includes providing people who use substances with test strips that can detect the presence of fentanyl and/or xylazine in the drug supply. They are disposable, single-use tests that are easy to employ when used as directed, but are not indicated for diagnostic use by medical professionals or the general public.

The Indian Health Service (IHS) National Committee on Heroin, Opioids and Pain Efforts (HOPE) has gathered and developed resources and tools that can be found at www.ihs.gov/opioids/harmreduction and include the following:

- [Fentanyl Test Strips Education](#);
- [Screening, Brief Intervention and Referral to Treatment](#);
- [Naloxone \(Narcan\) training toolkit](#); and
- [Syringe Service resources](#).

Additional Harm Reduction resources can be found at the following links:

- [Harm Reduction | Drug Overdose | CDC Injury Center](#);
- [Managing Patients Taking Xylazine-Adulterated Opioids in Emergency, Hospital, and Addiction Care Settings | National Institute on Drug Abuse \(NIDA\) \(nih.gov\)](#); and
- <https://www.cdc.gov/drugoverdose/deaths/other-drugs/xylazine/faq.html>.

Thank you for your continued support and engagement as we work to create, develop, and pilot new tools and approaches to combat the opioid epidemic within our communities. We appreciate your partnership in local, Area, and national efforts to implement and expand effective harm reduction initiatives throughout Indian Country. Please widely distribute this information, so that we can all work together collectively to address this very serious issue. If you have any questions, please contact CDR Samantha Gustafson, HOPE Committee Harm Reduction Lead, IHS, by e-mail at samantha.gustafson@ihs.gov, or by telephone at (218) 679-3912.

Sincerely,

Roselyn Tso
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Roselyn Tso
Director