



Office of Alcoholism and
Substance Abuse Services

Department
of Health



Arlene González-Sánchez, M.S., L.M.S.W.
Commissioner

Howard A. Zucker, M.D., J.D.
Commissioner

MaryEllen Eila
Commissioner

September 20, 2018

Dear Colleague:

As we begin a new school year, we are urgently asking for your assistance to help maintain the health and safety of students across New York State by drawing your attention to the increased use of two dangerous and lethal substances – opioids and synthetic cannabinoids. Opioids include certain prescription drugs and heroin. Synthetic cannabinoids are also known as K2 or synthetic marijuana (although it does not contain marijuana) and are often marketed under brand names meant to appeal to youth, such as Spice, Green Giant, AK-47, and Geeked Up.

In 2016, there were more than 3,009 deaths associated with opioids statewide.¹ That is greater than 10 deaths per day. Among youth, the percentage of high school students in New York State who have reported using heroin or who have injected an illegal drug has more than doubled from 2005 to 2015.² In addition, in 2017, more than 6% of high schoolers report having used synthetic cannabinoids.³

Heroin is deadly by itself; and it is easy to become addicted. However, the recent increase in opioid overdose deaths is linked to the increasing presence of fentanyl in heroin and other illegal drugs. Fentanyl is also found in counterfeit pill forms. Fentanyl is a powerful synthetic opioid 50-100 times stronger than morphine. It compounds the dangers for individuals who are either experimenting or routinely using illicit substances. It is either mixed with heroin or sold as heroin. It is also occasionally mixed with cocaine, methamphetamine, counterfeit pain killers and benzodiazepines. A single dosage of fentanyl can be lethal.

Naloxone can be an effective antidote to an opioid overdose even when fentanyl is involved. Timely administration of naloxone is critical if an overdose is suspected. We are encouraging school districts that have not already done so to consider having naloxone, the antidote to opioid overdoses, available on-site in their schools. Guidance for doing so may be found at: <https://www.schoolhealthny.com/OpioidOverdose>. School districts can take action to save lives by registering with the New York State Department of Health as an Opioid Overdose Prevention Program, or by participating in one of the other options listed here to receive free naloxone: [Administration of Naloxone School Setting Option Chart](#). Information on doing so may be found at: www.health.ny.gov/overdose or https://www.health.ny.gov/diseases/aids/general/opioid_overdose_prevention/schools.htm.

In 2017 in New York State, 6222 emergency department visits were related to synthetic cannabinoids. Besides the ever-changing, catchy names, these illegal substances are sold in colorful graphic packaging meant to appeal to young people. Synthetic cannabinoids can cause intense hallucinations, psychotic episodes, kidney failure, respiratory illness, and can be life-

¹ CDC WONDER, multiple cause of death query, accessed August 28, 2018.

²Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). [2005-2015 Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance System Data](#). Available on the New York State Department of Health website. Accessed on April 14, 2017.

³Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). [2005-2015 Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance System Data](#). Available on the New York State Department of Health website. Accessed on April 14, 2017.

threatening. Users may have suicidal thoughts and can maim, seriously injure, or even kill, themselves or others while under the influence of these man-made substances.

We are asking school districts to continue to educate and raise awareness about the dangers of opioids, and synthetics. We encourage you to utilize the New York State Addiction and Substance Use Disorder Educational Resource, which is available both on a flash drive and online at no cost. This flash drive includes the Health Education Standards Modernization Supplemental Guidance Document: Instructional Resource Packet for Heroin & Opioids, information about synthetics and first-hand video stories from real New Yorkers about warning signs, denial, the trajectory and power of addiction, treatment, and recovery. To order, please send an email to: ogs.sm.gdc@ogs.ny.gov, or mail your request to:

PUBLICATIONS
NYSDOH Distribution Center
OGS Consolidated Warehouse
P.O. Box 343
Guilderland, New York 12084

When placing an order please include the school name, company, or facility, along with your physical address, and the name, e-mail address, and phone number of a contact person. Please include the following reference: New York State Addiction and Substance Use Disorder Educational Resource - Pub.# 12029. Please note that flash drives cannot be mailed to post office boxes.

The entire content of the flash drive is available online free of charge, at: https://www.health.ny.gov/professionals/narcotic/docs/educational_resource_letter.pdf.


Additional new resources that are part of the recently launched "You Can Be the Difference" campaign remind all New Yorkers that help is available and we all play a part in combatting addiction to these and other substances. Campaign brochures and videos on prevention, treatment, and recovery services [are available here](#). If you are not already familiar with the impact of opioids in your community, we encourage you to visit www.health.ny.gov/statistics/opioid, where you can find county-level data on opioid-related mortality, emergency room use, treatment admissions, and naloxone administration. Another resource addressing the rising toll that opioids, including heroin, are taking on New Yorkers is found at: <http://www.p12.nysed.gov/sss/documents/OpioidEducationalResourceApril2018.pdf>.


We will continue to provide you with access to critical information and resources to help prevent drug use, fight addiction, and keep students safe.

Thank you for your continued commitment to the students of New York State.

Sincerely,


MaryEllen Elia
Commissioner
State Education Department
President, USNY


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Department of Health


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