

MILWAUKEE NEWS

# 2016 begins with a new spike in deaths tied to painkiller fentanyl

By *John Diederich* of the *Journal Sentinel*

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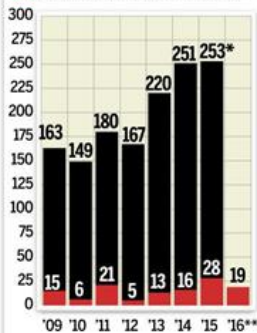
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## Overdose deaths

The Milwaukee County medical examiner is investigating 19 deaths this year thought to be related to fentanyl, a powerful synthetic pain medication.

### Milwaukee County overdose deaths, accidental and suicide

FENTANYL-RELATED DEATHS



\* Seven deaths pending final reports.  
\*\*Overdose deaths not available for 2016, all fentanyl deaths are pending final reports.

Sources: Milwaukee County medical examiner's office, Journal Sentinel files

A grim death toll linked to the powerful painkiller [fentanyl](#) is surging again in Milwaukee County as the medical examiner investigates 19 fatalities tied to the drug, the office announced Friday.

In comparison, the Milwaukee County medical examiner's office investigated [28 fentanyl deaths in 2015](#) and [16 in all of 2014](#).

The deaths, recorded since Dec. 28, have not been confirmed by toxicology reports, but indications are that fentanyl likely was involved, according to the office.

There were 13 men and six women among the dead, ranging in age from 18 to 63, a summary of the deaths showed. The two largest age groups were those in the 20s and 50s.

Fourteen of the deaths were in Milwaukee, two in Franklin, one in West Allis and two in Cudahy. Eight people died in one week this month.

In several of the cases, syringes were found nearby, indicating the deceased may have been using fentanyl thinking it was heroin or in coordination with

Fentanyl, which is used to put patients under for surgery and to alleviate severe pain, is 50 times more powerful than street heroin and 100 times stronger than prescription morphine.

Until recently, fentanyl deaths in Milwaukee were most often from people abusing fentanyl patches, lozenges and "lollipops" — delivery systems meant to slow the dose of the drug, a review of autopsies shows.

Of the 19 deaths, none appear to be related to the misuse of a fentanyl patch but stem from the illicit use of controlled substances and multiple-drug abuse, according to the medical examiner.

There was no information about the possible source of the drug linked to the deaths, though in recent years much of the contraband fentanyl was coming in from China.

Because it is a synthetic, fentanyl can be made in underground labs, though its production is complicated. Known as synthetic heroin or China White, this form of fentanyl looks like heroin and is often mixed with other drugs — sometimes with deadly results.

Law enforcement in Milwaukee did not have any information about arrests related to the recent deaths.

Medical examiner reports related to the 19 deaths were not available. They will be released after a final cause of death is determined.

Communities nationwide also are dealing with fentanyl-related overdose deaths. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [issued a health alert](#) late last year, saying it and the Drug Enforcement Agency "are investigating recent increases in fentanyl-related unintentional overdose fatalities in multiple states across the U.S."

The DEA issued its own [national alert](#) in March, calling fentanyl a "threat to health and safety."

Heroin continues to be the largest single category of overdose deaths in Milwaukee.

will be another record, the medical examiner said, though the numbers are not finalized.

In 2014, for the first time, heroin deaths were greater than either car crashes or homicides in the county that year.

Milwaukee has been chosen to take part in a [new \\$2 million comprehensive strategy](#) led by the DEA to prevent opioid misuse, heroin abuse and violent crime.

The "360 Degree Strategy" will seek to strengthen partnerships among health care professionals, social service organizations and government agencies to provide long-term help and support to create drug-free communities, officials said. The state Department of Justice has [mounted an education effort](#) about the dangers of painkillers as well.



#### About John Diedrich

John Diedrich writes about crime, federal issues, ultimate fighting and guns. His investigations have been honored with various national awards including a George Polk Award for reporting on rogue gun stores and an IRE award for exposing botched undercover federal stings.

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