

A Dangerous Drug

Fentanyl is a type of opioid. Opioids are powerful painkillers that doctors sometimes prescribe to help their patients manage chronic pain. But when used incorrectly, any opioid can be extremely dangerous.

Fentanyl is even more dangerous than most opioids. That's because it is incredibly potent—100 times stronger than morphine, which itself is extremely strong. According to the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA), a dose of fentanyl tiny enough to fit on the tip of a pencil can cause your breathing to stop.

Fentanyl is also cheaper to make than many other pain medications. Its cheapness, combined with its potency, makes it extremely attractive to drug dealers looking to maximize profits. These dealers illegally manufacture fentanyl and then sell it disguised as other common painkillers, such as OxyContin and Vicodin. In 2020, deaths from drug overdoses skyrocketed by 30 percent, and drug enforcement agents say fentanyl-laced fake pills are largely to blame.

Just a Tap Away

You need a prescription for most legitimate painkillers, but drug dealers sell them illegally on the streets. They also are increasingly selling pills on social media, using popular platforms like TikTok and Instagram to target teens and young adults.

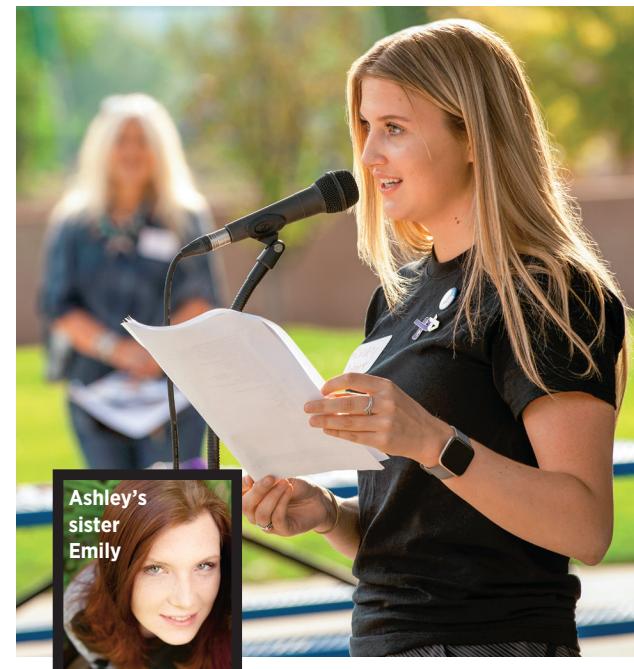
In response, social media companies say they're working to shut down dealers and keep teens safe. For example, when someone searches for drug-related words on Snapchat, they're directed to a portal where they can learn about fake pills. Police are also using undercover Instagram, Facebook, and Snapchat accounts to identify and arrest dealers.

But there's still a long way to go before all teens know about the dangers of buying or taking pills not specifically prescribed for them. According to a recent survey, only 27 percent of teens are aware that fentanyl is being used in counterfeit pills.

The activists on the following pages want to change that. They've all been touched by the fentanyl epidemic, and are fighting back to try to prevent more tragic deaths from fake pills. Here are their stories.

“I’M RAISING AWARENESS WITH MY VOICE.”

—Ashley, 17, Glenwood Springs, CO



WE GOT THE CALL THAT MY SISTER, Emily, had died on my birthday. I was in shock. Emily was always helping others. She would do things like go to school early to cook breakfast for her teachers, and she grew vegetables to donate to people in need. She also had a substance use disorder, but she'd gotten help and hadn't used drugs for a year and a half.

Before she died, Emily had been texting us about a toothache, so we think she bought a pill online, believing it was the prescription painkiller Percocet. We don't know where the pill came from, but we know that it contained fentanyl, and the fentanyl was what killed her.

After Emily died, I didn't know what to do with my grief. My sister had been the person I would phone or text when I needed advice. It's still hard to imagine going through life's big moments, like graduating from high school and starting college, without my big sister.

GREGG & CATH PHOTOGRAPHERS (ALL IMAGES)



Ashley walks to raise awareness; the flags in memory of victims of overdoses, below; Emily's backpack with notes, bottom.



At the time she died, Emily was in school to get a degree in addiction therapy counseling—another way she wanted to help people. I decided the best way I could honor her memory was to continue the work she was doing by speaking out about the dangers of fake pills.

I started by planting the purple flags for those we've lost. I also speak at schools. I tell Emily's story and talk about how social media is worsening the fake pill epidemic. For some kids, my presentation is their

Rx Real Talk

Just because a pill comes from a doctor doesn't mean it's safe for you. You should never:

1 Take any medication that was not specifically prescribed for you by your doctor.

2 Use a medication in any way other than how it is prescribed.

3 Mix any type of medication with other drugs or alcohol.

first time learning about fentanyl.

I bring a little piece of Emily with me to these presentations: her old red backpack. At the end of my talk, I ask kids to drop a notecard with their anonymous thoughts into Emily's backpack. By the time I leave, that bag is full of messages of honesty and optimism. Knowing that I've made an impact makes me feel

hopeful too. While it's too late to save my sister, I'm dedicated to spreading Emily's story and fighting to save others' lives.