

Deadly, Ultra-Pure Heroin Arrives

Unsuspecting users risk instant death

(AP) — Mexican drug smugglers are increasingly peddling a form of ultra-potent heroin that sells for as little as \$10 a bag and is so pure it can kill unsuspecting users instantly, sometimes before they even remove the syringe from their veins.

An Associated Press review of drug overdose data shows that so-called "black tar" heroin — named for its dark, goopy consistency — and other forms of the drug are contributing to a spike in overdose deaths across the nation and attracting a new generation of users who are caught off guard by its potency.

Authorities are concerned that the potency and price of the heroin from Mexico and Colombia could widen the drug's appeal, just as crack did for cocaine decades ago.

The Latin American heroin comes in the form of black tar or brown powder, and it has proven especially popular in rural and suburban areas.

Originally associated with rock stars, hippies and inner-city junkies, heroin in the 1970s was usually smuggled from Asia and the Middle East and was around 5 percent pure. The rest was "filler" such as sugar, starch, powdered milk, even brick dust. The low potency meant that

many users injected the drug to maximize the effect.

But in recent years, Mexican drug dealers have improved the way they process poppies, the brightly colored flowers supplied by drug farmers that provide the raw ingredients for heroin, opium and painkillers such as morphine. Purity levels have increased, and prices have fallen.

Federal agents now commonly find heroin that is 50 percent pure and sometimes as much as 80 percent pure.

The greater potency allows more heroin users to snort the drug or smoke it and still achieve a sustained high — an attractive alternative for teenagers and suburbanites who don't want the HIV risk or the track marks on their arms that come with repeated injections.

In Oregon, state Medical Examiner Karen Gunson said the heroin problem is worst in communities along Interstate 5. The state had 131 heroin-related overdose deaths last year — 42 more than three years earlier.

The dead simply didn't know the risks of the heroin they used, she said.

"We're seeing it sometimes 80 percent pure," Gunson said. "There's no FDA approval on this



Sue Tayon poses for a photo in her home holding an urn containing her daughter Nikki Tayon's ashes in Overland, Mo. Tayon's 28-year-old daughter, Nikki, died of an overdose on heroin that was 90 percent pure, her mother said. (AP Photo)

stuff. If you're using it every day, your chances grow and grow that it's going to kill you."

Among the drug's casualties was William Henderson, a 29-year-old welder from rural Missouri who died in his sleep in 2009, hours after snorting heroin. A bear of a man at 6-foot-1 and 300 pounds, he had tried the drug only a few times.

His wife recalled waking up to find the alarm buzzing. Her husband's body had turned blue, and his stomach was cold to the touch.

An increasing amount of the deadliest heroin appears to be coming from Mexico. Although the vast majority still arrives from overseas,

Mexican dealers appear to be chipping away at the U.S. market.

As recently as two years ago, state and federal drug agents saw heroin arriving from Colombia, Asia and Mexico. But as the availability and quality of cocaine and methamphetamine have declined, Mexican smugglers have stepped up heroin shipments to the U.S.

Independent Mexican smugglers have the market largely to themselves because the major drug cartels only dabble in heroin, preferring to focus on locally grown marijuana and Colombian cocaine, according to a DEA official in El Paso, Texas. The agent spoke on the condition of anonymity, citing security

concerns and his ongoing role in active drug investigations.

Heroin metabolizes in the body so quickly that medical examiners often cannot pinpoint the drug as a cause of death unless there is other evidence to back it up — say, a needle or a syringe found near the body. Also, many victims use multiple drugs and alcohol, so citing a specific substance is often impossible.

At the start of the decade, roughly 2,000 people a year died from heroin overdoses nationwide, according to records kept by the Centers for Disease Control. By 2008, the drug was blamed for at least 3,000 deaths in the 36 states that responded to records requests from the AP. Deaths from 2009 have not yet been compiled.

The AP contacted agencies in all 50 states, as well as officials in the District of Columbia and New York City, including medical examiners, coroners and health departments. The survey showed that heroin deaths rose 18.2 percent from 2007 to 2008, and 20.3 percent from 2006 to 2008.

Law enforcement officials and drug-treatment experts believe those statistics woefully undercount the actual number of deaths.

To hook new users, dealers are selling heroin cheap — often around \$10 a bag.

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TriMet Makes Safety Changes

Line 6 won't jump 4 lanes

As part of ongoing efforts to improve the safety of bus operations, TriMet is changing the way the Line 6-Martin Luther King Jr. Blvd. bus comes off the Hawthorne Bridge onto Southeast Grand Avenue, as well as making changes to all courtesy stop/night stop procedures.

Currently, vehicles traveling eastbound over the Hawthorne Bridge use a slip lane to veer left onto Grand before the signalized intersection at Grand. Line 6 buses used the slip lane

and then merged to the right over four lanes in just under 400 feet.

TriMet requested that the city of Portland change striping at the signalized intersection at Grand. This change means that buses will no longer use the slip lane and instead turn left at the intersection and turn directly into the far right travel lane. This eliminates multiple lane changes in that busy area.

TriMet is also making changes to its courtesy stop/Night Stop procedures regarding the distance required between a non-designated stop and an upcoming left turn. A courtesy stop/Night Stop is when

an operator lets a rider deboard at a safe location that is not at a designated stop.

TriMet will begin implementing a change to its procedures that will not allow the non-designated stop in the block in which a bus makes a left hand turn. In areas without standard city blocks, a minimum of 100 feet between the stop and the intersection is required for each lane change preceding the left turn.

The changes are in addition to a comprehensive safety review that was ordered after a TriMet bus turning left hit five pedestrians at a downtown intersection, killing two people.



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