

Trump's executive order classifies illicit fentanyl as 'weapon of mass destruction'

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President [Donald Trump](#) on Monday designated illicit fentanyl as a “weapon of mass destruction” in an executive order.

The order goes beyond calling it a lethal drug because it can be weaponized to cause “concentrated, large-scale terror attacks by organized adversaries,” [according to the order](#).

“Illicit fentanyl is closer to a chemical weapon than a narcotic,” the order says. “Two milligrams, an almost undetectable trace amount equivalent to 10 to 15 grains of table salt, constitutes a lethal dose.”

And because fentanyl is relatively cheap to manufacture, drug traffickers lace it with other drugs or even marijuana to increase potency and reduce costs. Fentanyl can be pressed into pills made to look like legitimate prescription medications, including oxycodone (OxyContin), hydrocodone (Vicodin), alprazolam (Xanax) and stimulants like Adderall.

A former federal prosecutor specializing in national security matters [told CNN](#) that the order was a “political exercise” and questioned whether it would have any impact.



Hundreds of seized fentanyl pills that imitate Oxycodone M30 are shown at the Drug Enforcement Administration's Dallas Field Division lab in 2023. President Donald Trump on Monday designated illicit fentanyl as a “weapon of mass destruction” in an executive order.

“We already have statutes on the books that are tested, that prosecutors and agents are accustomed to working with, and they’re very clear, and they accomplish the same goals,” Dennis Fitzpatrick, a former national security attorney with the Eastern District of Virginia, said. “There’s no practical reason to label fentanyl as a weapon of mass destruction. It’s a political exercise.”

He said Congress “has the authority, has the responsibility.”

[On July 16](#), Trump signed bi-

partisan legislation that attempts to curb the illegal flow of fentanyl into the United States by reclassifying the opioid as a Schedule 1 drug under the Controlled Substances Act. Under the law, fentanyl-related substances are triggered by the same quantity thresholds as analogues -- 100 grams or more and a 10-year mandatory minimum prison sentence.

The manufacture, distribution, dispensation or possession is in violation of the Controlled Substances Act. And [it is a crime to use](#), threaten or at-

tempt to use weapons of mass destruction.

The new designation “unleashes every tool to combat the cartels and foreign networks responsible for flooding communities with this deadly substance.”

“As President of the United States, my highest duty is the defense of the country and its citizens,” the order reads.

The U.S. Department of Defense was directed to enforce the criminal code related to fentanyl, and the Justice Department was asked to pursue harsher penalties for fentanyl-related crimes.

Also, the Treasury Department “shall pursue appropriate actions against relevant assets and financial institutions in accordance with applicable law for those involved in or supporting the manufacture, distribution, and sale of illicit fentanyl and its core precursor chemicals.”

And Homeland Security “shall identify threat networks related to fentanyl smuggling using WMD- and nonproliferation-related threat intelligence to support the full spectrum of counter-fentanyl operations.”

“With this historic executive order... we’re formally classifying as a weapon of mass destruction, which is what it is,” Trump [said at the White House](#). “No bomb does what this has done. 200,000 to 300,000 people die every year, that we know of. So we’re formally classifying fentanyl as a weapon of mass

destruction.”

During the public event, he honored U.S. service members with medals “for their central role in the protection of our border.” Defense Peter Hegseth revived “Mexican Border Service” medals, which the administration learned were [first established](#) by Congress in 1918.

Among Americans 18 to 45, fentanyl is the leading cause of death. There were an estimated 80,391 overdose deaths in the U.S. in 2024, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Overall, more than 48,400 overdose deaths involved synthetic opioids

Synthetic opioid deaths are down about 37% between 2023 and 2024.

“The supply side of the equation has not worked,” Dr. Daniel Ciccarone, a professor at the University of California, in San Francisco, whose research has focused on illicit drug trends in the U.S., [told CNN in May](#). “Even if we say a fentanyl supply shock caused this decline in overdose deaths, we can’t count on creating it again. Harm reduction keeps people engaged, and if we don’t keep this cohort engaged, they will do worse.”

Fentanyl can continue to be legal for medical purposes. Brand names include Actiq, an oral lozenge or “lollipop;” Duragesic, a skin patch; Fentora tablet placed between the cheek and gum; Sublimaze, an in-

jection administered for surgical anesthesia; and Lazanda and Subsys, which are sprays.

Most fentanyl that enters the United States is manufactured in Mexico with chemicals primarily imported from China and India.

The Pentagon has been conducting airstrikes on more than 20 vessels in the Caribbean and eastern Pacific to seize drugs instead of being smuggled into the United States, usually through ports of entry.

A weapon of mass destruction is defined by the FBI as a “destructive device, such as an explosive or incendiary bomb, rocket or grenade; a weapon that is designed to cause death or serious injury through toxic or poisonous chemical; a weapon that contains a biological agent or toxin;” or “a weapon that is designed to release dangerous levels of radiation or radioactivity.”

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