

Carfentanil Is Resurging. Your Confirmatory Panel May Not Be Looking For It.

Clinical Scenario

A patient in an OTP survives an overdose after receiving multiple naloxone doses in the field. The urine drug screen and fentanyl confirmatory panel both return positive for fentanyl and norfentanyl, and the case is documented as a routine fentanyl overdose.

The Pearl

Carfentanil, a fentanyl analog roughly 100 times more potent than fentanyl, has reemerged in the U.S. drug supply after near-absence in 2021 to 2022. Labcorp's June 2026 Evolving Drug Trends report found carfentanil in more than 10% of fentanyl-positive urine specimens, and DEA laboratories identified carfentanil in 1,400 drug seizures in 2025, up from 145 in 2023, a tenfold increase. **A confirmatory LC-MS/MS panel that targets only fentanyl and norfentanyl will not identify carfentanil, even when it is present in the specimen; carfentanil must be included as its own target analyte on the confirmatory method.** A result reported as fentanyl positive, norfentanyl positive does not rule carfentanil in or out unless the laboratory's panel specifically includes it.

Why It Matters

- CDC reports that deaths with carfentanil detected increased approximately sevenfold nationally, from 29 during January through June 2023 to 238 during January through June 2024, with detection reported across 37 states.
- DEA field divisions issued public safety advisories in early June 2026 describing fentanyl supplies mixed with emerging synthetics, including carfentanil. Patients who require unusually high or repeated naloxone doses, or prolonged monitoring after reversal, may be presenting with carfentanil co-exposure that a routine fentanyl panel does not capture.

Bottom Line: If a patient requires repeated or high-dose naloxone, or your community has an active carfentanil advisory, confirm with the laboratory whether carfentanil is an included target analyte on the fentanyl confirmatory panel; a fentanyl-positive result alone does not confirm or exclude carfentanil exposure.

References

1. Labcorp. Evolving Drug Trends: June 2026 Report. Labcorp; 2026. [Primary Data]
2. Tanz LJ, Stewart A, Gladden RM, Ko JY, Owens L, O'Donnell J. Detection of Illegally Manufactured Fentanyls and Carfentanil in Drug Overdose Deaths, United States, 2021-2024. MMWR Morb Mortal Wkly Rep. 2024;73:1099-1105. [Primary Data]

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