W-18: A Deadly new Drug

PORTSMOUTH, N.H. —New England police are warning about a powerful new street drug that could be 100 times deadlier than fentanyl.

The federal Drug Enforcement Administration confirmed that the drug W-18 has been found in Pennsylvania and Florida. The drug was developed by a Canadian grad student in the 1980s in what was supposed to be a study of possible painkillers. But police said it ended up in the hands of clandestine labs in China and has now arrived on the streets of North America.

"Based on all the research, you're going to have a one-time use with W-18," said Timothy Pifer of the New Hampshire State Police Forensic Lab. "I've seen that it's 100 times, 1,000 times more potent and deadly than fentanyl."

The DEA has warned the forensic lab about W-18, a drug that has only ever been tested on rats and mice.

"It is a research-grade chemical, so there have been no clinical studies of human interactions with this particular drug, which is part of the problem we're dealing with as public health and public safety concerns," Pifer said. "Currently, the research says they're not even aware if Narcan or naloxone would have an effect on this particular drug," Pifer said.

Police in Maine put out a warning to the region.

"It looks just like fentanyl, it looks just like white powdered heroin, so you can't tell the difference," Sanford, Maine, Police Chief Tom Connolly said.

Officials said drug users might not have any idea they're using W-18 until it's too late.

"They don't know if it's heroin, fentanyl, a combination of the two, and now they're going to know if there's W-18 contained in that particular sample," Pifer said.

Because it's so new, W-18 is not yet controlled by the federal government. Because there's no test for it yet, there's no way to know if it might already be responsible for the escalation in overdose deaths, officials said.

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