A PARENT'S GUIDE · UPDATED NOVEMBER 2026

The Fentanyl Trap

How dealers target teens online, what's changed on Snapchat, and what every family should know.

Fake pills are made to look exactly like the real thing, and they're being sold through the apps our kids use every day. This guide covers the facts, the settings worth checking, the conversations that matter most, and what to do in an emergency.

THE COMMON PARENT

WITH CAT & NAT

THE BASICS · 01

What is fentanyl, and why is it so dangerous?

Fentanyl is a synthetic opioid that's 50 to 100 times more potent than morphine. A tiny amount, about the size of a few grains of salt, can be lethal.

It's often pressed into counterfeit pills made to look like Percocet, OxyContin, or Xanax, or mixed into other street drugs. There's no way to tell by looking.

Why it's so deadly

Unpredictable strength

Counterfeit pills look like real medication, but the amount of fentanyl in each one can vary wildly.

It works fast

Breathing can slow or stop within minutes, sometimes before anyone realizes something is wrong.

You can't see, smell, or taste it

Most teens who die never meant to take fentanyl at all. A CDC study found only about a third of young people who died of a fentanyl overdose had any known history of opioid use.

New, stronger opioids keep appearing

In April 2026, the White House drug policy office warned about a new synthetic opioid called cychlorphine turning up in fake pills, linked to at least 55 deaths.

The good news, and why it's not over

Overdose deaths are falling. U.S. teen overdose deaths dropped about 40% in 2024, and opioid deaths in Canada fell 23% in 2025. But fentanyl is still involved in roughly three out of four teen overdose deaths.

> **52% of U.S. eighth graders didn't see great risk in trying fentanyl once or twice.**
>
> JAMA Network Open, July 2026

That gap in understanding is exactly what this guide is here to close.

> **Naloxone (Narcan) can reverse an opioid overdose if given in time. Fentanyl overdoses may need more than one dose.**

ONLINE · 02

How dealers are targeting teens

Police in Canada and the U.S. have seized fentanyl pills and blocks in bright colours that look a lot like candy. Some officials say this is meant to appeal to young people, while some drug policy experts think it's more about branding. Either way, the message for teens is the same: brightly coloured pills or pieces can contain fentanyl too.

The bigger shift is where the selling happens. During the pandemic, many dealers moved online. Social media and messaging apps let them advertise with emojis and code words, reach kids directly, and leave little trail behind.

Teens may think they're buying a Percocet, Xanax, or Adderall to cope with stress, sleep, or study, and instead get a counterfeit pill containing fentanyl.

Why Snapchat comes up so often

Snapchat is the app most often named in lawsuits and news stories about teen fentanyl deaths. Families allege that features like disappearing messages, My Eyes Only, Quick Add friend suggestions, and Snap Map made it easy for dealers to find teens and hard for parents to see what was happening.

Snap disputes this. The company says it uses technology to proactively find and ban dealer accounts, blocks drug-related searches, and works with police. In 2024, Snap says it removed more than 2.4 million pieces of drug-related content and disabled 516,000 accounts, and that it caught over 90% of drug activity before anyone reported it. Critics, including parents who have lost children, say dealers still get around filters by switching accounts and using emojis and slang.

> **The honest picture: Snap has done more than it once did, and dealers are still there.**

Dealers also use Instagram, TikTok, Telegram, and other apps, so these lessons apply beyond Snapchat.

SNAPCHAT · 03

What's changed on Snapchat in 2026

NEW **Friends-only sharing for 13 to 15-year-olds**

Since June 2026, younger teens' Stories and Spotlight videos are visible only to mutually accepted friends, and are no longer pushed out to the public. Teens 16 and 17 can share publicly with extra limits.

NEW **More in Family Center**

In January 2026, Snap added a weekly look at how much time your teen spends on Snapchat each day, broken down by chatting, Snap Map, Spotlight, and Stories. Parents also now see how their teen likely knows each new friend they add. You still can't read their messages.

Protections that were already in place

Teen accounts are private by default, and teens can only chat with mutual friends or people in their contacts. Teens only show up in Quick Add or search when they share several mutual friends with someone. A pop-up warns them when someone with no mutual friends adds them, or when a message comes from an account others have blocked or reported. Snap Map location sharing is off by default and can only be shared with friends.

> **One big catch: all of this depends on your teen's birthday being accurate. If they signed up with an adult age, none of the teen protections or Family Center apply.**

Lawsuits are moving forward

A California case brought by families whose children died after buying fentanyl-laced pills from dealers they met on Snapchat survived Snap's attempt to dismiss it in 2024 and is still ongoing. States including New Mexico, Florida, Utah, and Nevada have also sued Snap over child safety, with claims that include drug sales. Snap calls the allegations legally and factually flawed, and none of these cases has been decided.

SETTINGS · 04

If your teen uses Snapchat: settings to check together

Sit down with your teen and their phone. Doing it side by side, and explaining why, matters more than any single setting.

01 **Check their birthday.**
Make sure the account shows their real age so teen protections apply.

02 **Set up Family Center.**
From your own Snapchat account, open Family Center and invite your teen. They have to accept.

`Settings → Family Center`

03 **Turn off "See Me in Quick Add."**
This keeps your teen from being suggested to people they don't know.

04 **Keep Snap Map in Ghost Mode.**
Or share location only with family and a few close friends.

05 **Review their friends list together.**
Ask about any names you don't recognize, and remove people they don't know in real life.

06 **Show them how to block and report.**
Press and hold on a name or message to find these options. Reporting a dealer helps get the account removed.

> **Family Center shows you who your teen is talking to, not what they say. Settings lower the risk, but they can't replace the conversations that come next.**

AT HOME · 05

What parents can do

Talk openly about the risks

Explain that any pill that doesn't come from a pharmacy could contain fentanyl, no matter how real it looks, and that one pill can kill. Talk about it the way you'd talk about drinking and driving: calmly, more than once, and before it comes up.

Some questions to start with

"Have you heard about fake pills being sold to teens online?"

"Has anyone ever offered you something on Snapchat or another app?"

"What would you do if someone offered you a pill to help with stress or sleep?"

"Why do you think some teens take that risk?"

Make the no-punishment promise

Tell them they can always come to you if they see something, get offered something, or a friend is in trouble, and they won't be punished for telling you. That promise is what makes kids actually reach out.

Use parental controls, but don't rely on them

Settings and Family Center can't catch everything, especially if a teen has a second account. Ongoing conversations do more.

Stay involved without spying

Ask about who they're talking to and how they know them. Ask them to show you how they use Snapchat and other apps, and look at their friends list together. Notice changes in mood, sleep, friends, or money that don't add up, and ask about them gently.

Watch for stress behind the risk

Many teens who try pills are looking for help with anxiety, sleep, or school pressure. If that sounds like your child, a doctor or counsellor is a better path than a fake pill, and you can help them get there.

EMERGENCY · 06

Overdose safety every teen should know

We never want to encourage drug use. But teens may one day be at a party, or with a friend, where drugs are present. Knowing what to do in that moment can save a life, including someone else's.

SIGNS OF AN OVERDOSE

- **Slow, shallow, or stopped breathing**
- **Blue or grey lips or fingertips**
- **Gurgling or snoring sounds**
- **Tiny pupils**
- **Can't be woken up**

See any of these? Call 911 right away.

Only trust pills from a pharmacy
A pill from a friend, a dealer, or an app could contain fentanyl, even if it looks exactly like a real prescription.

Call 911, every time
Don't wait to see if they sleep it off. In Canada, the Good Samaritan Drug Overdose Act protects people who call for help from simple drug possession charges, and many U.S. states have similar laws. Make sure your teen knows calling is always the right choice.

Keep naloxone (Narcan) on hand
It can reverse an opioid overdose and won't harm someone who isn't overdosing. In Canada, free naloxone kits are available at many pharmacies. In the U.S., Narcan nasal spray is sold over the counter. Keep one at home and consider one in your teen's bag. Fentanyl overdoses may need more than one dose, so stay with the person until help arrives.

Never be alone
If someone does take a substance, being with someone who can call for help and give naloxone is what saves lives.

Don't mix substances
Combining drugs with alcohol or other medications greatly increases the risk of overdose.

For more harm reduction information, visit dancesafe.org or tripsit.me.

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