

FT-Raman spectroscopy for the detection and identification of fentanyl and other illicit drugs

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Introduction

Illicitly manufactured fentanyl (IMF) remains a primary contributor to drug overdose deaths and continues to present significant challenges for public health agencies, law enforcement, first responders, and forensic laboratories. The extreme potency of fentanyl and related synthetic opioids increases the health risks associated with accidental exposure during evidence handling and analysis. In addition, illicitly manufactured fentanyl is frequently encountered in counterfeit prescription tablets, powders, and mixtures containing other controlled substances, increasing the complexity of forensic investigations.

The illicit drug landscape continues to evolve with the emergence of fentanyl analogs, synthetic opioids, and other novel psychoactive substances. As forensic laboratories work to identify unknown materials and characterize increasingly complex samples, there is a growing need for analytical techniques that support rapid, reliable screening and identification while helping minimize sample handling.

Addressing these challenges requires the use of complementary analytical technologies across field and laboratory settings. Mass spectrometry-based techniques continue to play an important role in confirmatory analysis, while spectroscopic methods such as Raman spectroscopy offer additional capabilities for non-destructive screening and identification. Techniques such as GC/MS, LC/MS, LC/MS/MS, ion mobility spectrometry (IMS), and thermal desorption direct analysis in real-time mass spectrometry (TD-DART-MS) are commonly used to support the detection and characterization of synthetic opioids and complex drug mixtures.¹

Raman spectroscopy has long been used for the detection and identification of illicit drugs and adulterants, and offers a valuable addition to the forensic toolbox for the analysis of fentanyl and fentanyl analogs. FT-Raman utilizes a long-wavelength laser (1064 nm) which greatly reduces fluorescence and produces high signal-to-noise spectra, making it well suited for many narcotic samples that fluoresce. It also enables sampling through glass vials, polymer blister packs, and plastic evidence bags; hence, often requires little to no sample preparation. It is nondestructive and allows the custody chain to be maintained, given the possibility of qualitative and quantitative evaluation of the sample to confirm its integrity from its seizure until the sample is placed in the evidence file.²

In this application note, analyses of fentanyl as well as other illicit drugs using FT-Raman spectroscopy are presented. The advantages of FT-Raman for the detection and identification of illicit drugs are also discussed.

Materials and methods

All samples analyzed in this study were prepared at Albuquerque Police Department. Samples were analyzed in double bags, blister packs or glass vials, and handled in compliance with Schedule I controlled substance handling protocols. A Thermo Scientific™ Nicolet™ iS50 FT-IR Spectrometer equipped with a calcium fluoride beam splitter and an FT-Raman module with a 1064 nm laser was used for all analyses (Figure 1). A total of 64 scans were co-added for each spectrum at 8 cm⁻¹ resolution, with a total acquisition time of ~75s. The laser power was set at 0.5 mW. The spectra were searched against Thermo Scientific Law Enforcement and Security (LEnS) Raman and DEA Raman libraries using OMNIC library search and Spectra multicomponent search options.



Figure 1. An iS50 Raman module for the Thermo Scientific Nicolet iS50 FT-IR spectrometer.

Results and discussion

Figure 2A shows the Raman spectrum of bulk fentanyl in a double bag, directly acquired without any sample manipulation. Since the laser spot size is approximately 60 μm, a small quantity of samples, such as a few granules, can be analyzed with ease. An example is shown in Figure 2B. While Figure 2B exhibits a slightly higher noise level compared to Figure 2A, both samples were nonetheless positively identified as fentanyl citrate through library search.

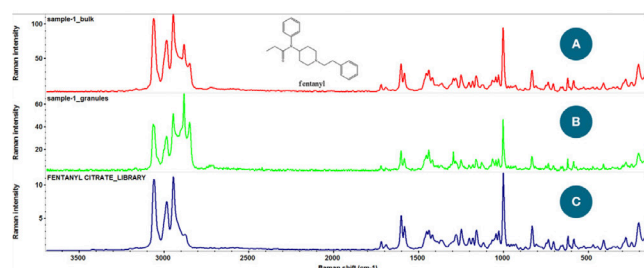


Figure 2. Raman spectra of (A) seized bulk fentanyl in a double-bag; (B) a few fentanyl granules in a double-bag; and (C) fentanyl citrate from DEA Raman library.

Raman spectroscopy is sensitive to both chemical and physical properties. Its unique selection rules generate a molecular fingerprint that is well suited to the differentiation between many illicit drug compounds and their analogs. Figure 3 shows the Raman spectra of a tablet as well as the 3,4-methylenedioxyamphetamine (MDA) and 3,4-methylenedioxymethamphetamine (MDMA) standards from the library. Despite the minute structural difference between MDA and MDMA (inset of Figure 3), Raman spectroscopy can unambiguously distinguish the two. In this case, the tablet was identified as MDA with a match score of 83, as opposed to a match score of 66 for MDMA.

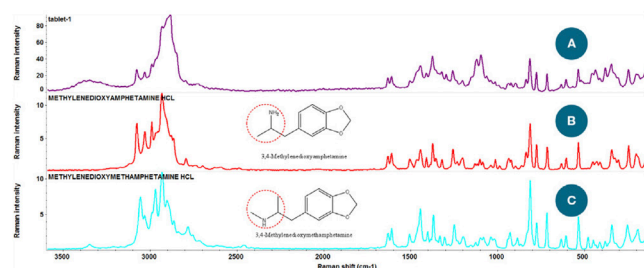


Figure 3. Raman spectra of (A) a tablet; (B) 3,4-methylenedioxyamphetamine (MDA) standard from the library; and (C) 3,4-methylenedioxymethamphetamine (MDMA) standard from the library.

Seized street drugs are often present in the form of mixtures. Figure 4 shows the Raman spectrum of an off-white powder sample in an evidence bag. Initial library search showed a similar match score for lactose and cocaine, suggesting that the sample contains multiple components. The spectrum was then subjected to the OMNIC Spectra multi-component search, and the sample was identified as a mixture of cocaine and β-D-lactose, a commonly used cutting agent.

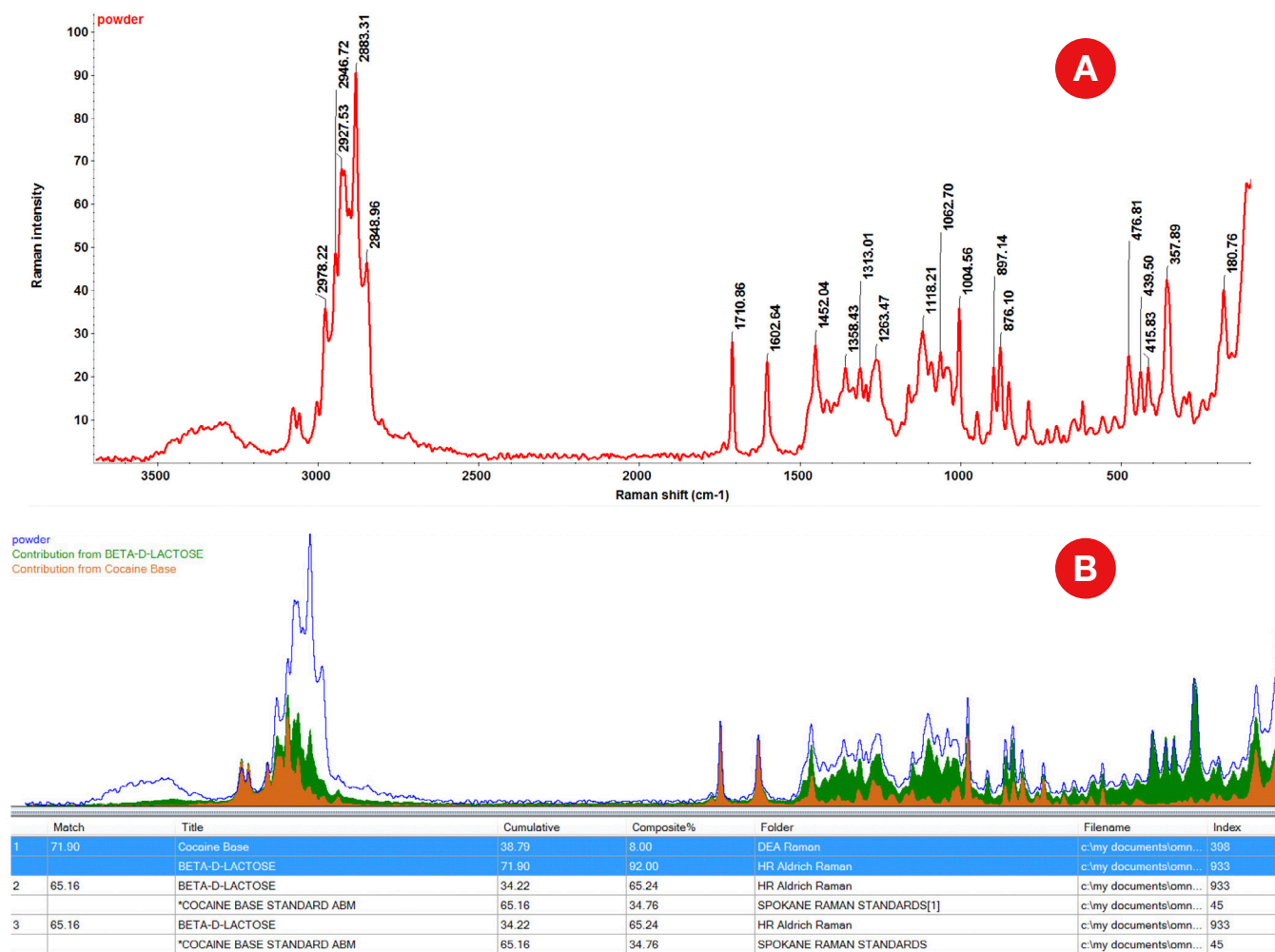


Figure 4. Raman spectra of a seized street drug sample containing cocaine and β -D-lactose.

Conclusions

The Nicolet iS50 FT-IR spectrometer equipped with the iS50 Raman module can serve as a valuable analytical tool for forensic laboratories investigating fentanyl, synthetic opioids, and other illicit drugs. Raman analysis requires little to no sample preparation and allows for direct measurements through glass vials and evidence bags, greatly reducing the risk of lab personnel's accidental exposure to high potency drugs such as fentanyl and fentanyl analogs. While the measurement of bulk narcotic samples is fast and straightforward, with a laser spot size of 60 μ m, acquisition of high-quality Raman spectra from as little as few granules is also possible. Combined with DEA and LEnS Raman libraries, OMNIC Spectra enables identification of multi-component illicit drugs with confidence. Raman spectroscopy using the iS50 Raman module is a safe, fast, and complementary technique for the screening, detection and identification of illicit drugs.

References

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