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**From the Office of Dr. Ninh Tran, Medical Officer of Health, Southwestern Public Health**

## **Xylazine and Benzodiazepines in Provincial Unregulated Drug Supply**

The Chief Medical Officer and Chief Coroner released a memo about the risks of toxicity from xylazine and benzodiazepines in the provincial unregulated drug supply. Data has demonstrated an increase in the frequency of both xylazine and benzodiazepines in Ontario, as communicated by the Office of the Chief Coroner for Ontario, Health Canada's Drug Analysis, and Toronto's Drug Checking Service. Our local surveillance has not identified evidence of unexpected xylazine in the drug supply, but we nonetheless will share the information with local partners, physicians, emergency departments, and first responders as we continue to monitor closely. Therefore, Southwestern Public Health is not issuing an official alert currently.

### **What is xylazine?**

It is a tranquilizer (commonly known as "tranq") used in veterinary medicine, and therefore is not intended for human use. It is typically used for sedation, muscle relaxation, and pain relief for animals. When xylazine is combined with other drugs, the risk of overdose and death is significantly increased. Harmful effects of xylazine include:

- Central nervous system depression, which lowers heart rate, blood pressure, and breathing, and causes blurred vision, disorientation, slurred speech, etc.;
- Xylazine is frequently combined with opioids, or CNS depressants (e.g., alcohol or benzodiazepines) can crucially depress vital signs, which can increase the risk of overdose and death;
- There is nothing currently available to reverse an Xylazine overdose. Naloxone can only reverse the effects of opioids; however, we recommend administering Naloxone if there is a suspected overdose because it can combat the effect of any opioid that may have been consumed; and
- Severe skin lesions include ulcers, infections, and abscesses, among people who inject drugs.

### **What are benzodiazepines?**

They are a class of medications that can be prescribed or found in the unregulated drug supply. Benzodiazepines often identified in the unregulated supply include etizolam, bromazolam, and flubromazepam. When benzodiazepines are mixed with other drugs, specifically other depressants, the risk of harm and toxicity significantly increases. Some important points to remember:

- Benzodiazepines may cause central nervous system depression, including slowed brain activity and breathing;
- Drug poisonings that include opioids and benzodiazepines can be extremely difficult to reverse since Naloxone will only act to reverse the opioid effects. For example, someone may still be sedated for an

extended period of time.

**Continue with harm reduction messages for substance use:**

- Try not to use alone. If you do, ensure someone knows where you are and checks on you.
- Avoid mixing substances, when possible.
- Ask around, and know your supply.
- Use caution and start with a small amount first.
- Carry a Naloxone kit. It will do no harm, even if you are unsure of the substances the person has in their system.
- Call 911 if there is an overdose. Seek medical care for any unusual skin lesions.
- Encourage using the National Overdose Response Services line at 1-888-688-NORS (6677).

**Dr. Ninh Tran**

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