

Strategic Approach to Xylazine Content in Local Illicit Drug Supply

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Executive Statement

Xylazine is an animal tranquilizer that is not currently a scheduled substance in the United States. It is a veterinary sedative with no approved use in humans due to the side effects it causes, including blood pressure fluctuations, potentially necrotic skin lesions, heavy sedation, and severe withdrawal. As an alpha-2 adrenergic receptor agonist, it is not countered by Narcan administration, which only reverses effects of opioids. Xylazine has been detected in the illicit drug supply in Albuquerque within the last six months using FTIR technology and other screening tools. The Office of National Drug Control Policy, has declared xylazine mixed with fentanyl (sometimes called “tranq”) as an emerging threat due to the health risks and increased potential for overdose caused by this polysubstance combination.

Background

Currently in Bernalillo County, there are few places offering specific services related to Xylazine consumption. Xylazine test strips and FTIR testing with lab confirmation are available, for example, at the NM Harm Reduction Collaborative office, however, the site has limited hours and only one location. They also provide occasional donated wound care supplies, which are an essential first-line defense since xylazine lesions can be healed without additional complications if appropriate hygiene is provided. For this type of wound, best practices as recommended by practitioners in Philadelphia, where xylazine was present in most samples tested as of 2021, include keeping wounds wet and covered to prevent infection.

Recommendations

Recommendation 1: Determine xylazine testing strategy for how to gather samples and inform people when an outbreak is happening to direct them to services if impacted.

Recommendation 2: Establish a daily drop in site for wound care with a goal of 24-hour drop in center. Augment the stationary site(s) with mobile wound care supply teams, which could include government agencies such as ACS and Metro Security with kits, as well as community organizations that do outreach work on the streets.

Recommendation 3: Partner with local detoxification and rehabilitation centers, as well as incarceration settings and hospitals, to prepare providers to identify xylazine withdrawal and treat the symptoms according to the best known practices. Research shows this includes specific timing and monitoring protocols for agonist treatment, and in rare cases, ICU care to treat escalating blood pressure.

Recommendation 4: Increase availability for local xylazine testing services. Fund organizations currently providing xylazine testing to increase the hours of availability and expand the number of service locations.

Recommendation 5: Establish Safe Consumption Site for medical monitoring to reduce the number of overdoses due to polysubstance consumption and to enable rapid referral to treatment and services.

Recommendation 6: Increase the availability of facilities with running water available for hygiene and wound care to prevent xylazine-related lesions from developing into more complex medical conditions. This could include additional day centers as well as mobile hygiene vans, such as used in the WASH Program in Aurora, CO.

References:

- Dickerson, M.D., Lynch, W.J., Rae, L (2023.) "Xylazine Wound Care: Improving Identification, Management, & Treatment." Rx and Illicit Drug Summit presentation.
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- U.S. Department of Justice, Drug Enforcement Administration. (2022.) "The Growing Threat of Xylazine and its Mixture in Illicit Drugs." DEA Joint Intelligence Report.