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Presence of Xylazine and Benzodiazepines in the Unregulated Drug Supply

Attention: Hospitals, Family Health Teams, Midwives, Nurse Practitioners, Physicians, Pharmacies, Beausoleil First Nation, Moose Deer Point First Nation, Rama First Nation, Wahta First Nation, Ontario Health Central Region, EMS

Date: Wednesday March 8, 2023

SMDHU recently received an update from Ontario's Chief Medical Officer of Health regarding substances currently being found in the unregulated drug supply in Ontario and risks of acute toxicity associated with their use. This information is being shared with health professionals, as well as people who use drugs, via community partner agencies.

Data from the Office of the Chief Coroner for Ontario, Health Canada's Drug Analysis Service, and Toronto's Drug Checking Service all indicate a **recent increase in xylazine as well as frequent benzodiazepine presence in the unregulated drug supply in Ontario**. These substances are often present together with opioids. While xylazine and benzodiazepines may lead to signs and symptoms that are similar to those associated with opioids, they will not respond to naloxone administration.

Xylazine is typically used by veterinarians for sedation, muscle relaxation and pain relief for animals. It's sometimes referred to as "horse tranquilizer". Xylazine is not approved for human use, and can produce significant harmful effects such as:

- Severe skin lesions
- Central nervous system depression, such as blurred vision, disorientation, dizziness, drowsiness, difficulty moving, slurred speech and fatigue.
- Respiratory depression
- Cardiovascular effects, such as low blood pressure and slow heart rate
- Death.

As you are aware, benzodiazepines are medications that may be prescribed or may be accessed through the unregulated drug supply. Benzodiazepines such as etizolam, bromazolam, and flubromazepam have been identified more often in the unregulated drug supply in Ontario in the past few years.

While use of xylazine or benzodiazepines alone is associated with risk of toxicity, the risk of acute toxicity increases further with the concurrent use of other depressants such as opioids and/or alcohol.



Data from the Office of the Chief Coroner for Ontario show:

- Xylazine was detected in 2-4% of opioid toxicity deaths between 2021 Q4 and 2022 Q3 (preliminary data). For opioid toxicity deaths in which xylazine was detected, fentanyl or fentanyl analogues were also detected in 97% of cases.
- Benzodiazepines were detected in an increasing proportion of opioid toxicity deaths between 2018 and 2022, with preliminary data showing benzodiazepines detected in 63% of cases in 2021 and 41% of cases in 2022.

On March 6, 2023, Central Region of the Ontario Provincial Police sent a media release warning members of the public of a *“possible highly potent and potentially fatal strain of illicit opioids that may be circulating within the County of Simcoe and the District of Muskoka after seven people lost their lives from suspected opioid overdose in the last 7 days, 4 of which occurred in the Simcoe Muskoka region.”*

Unfortunately, this occurrence is not out of the norm locally. **Since the start of the pandemic, one person is losing their life in Simcoe Muskoka every two or three days due to the opioid crisis that is being fueled by an increasingly toxic unregulated drug supply.** Recent suspected drug-related deaths data suggests that this unacceptably high rate of death is continuing into 2023. Data on local opioid-related harms can be found at [HealthSTATS.org](https://www.healthstats.org)

Please consider opportunities to reinforce the following prevention and harm reduction messages with individuals who may be at risk of overdose:

- Do not use drugs alone. If this is not possible, ask a friend or family member to check in on you, or use the National Overdose Response Line (1-888-688-6677)
- If using drugs with a friend, do not use drugs at the exact same time.
- Carry Naloxone and know how to respond to an opioid overdose.
- Seek medical care for unusual skin lesions.
- In the case of a suspected opioid poisoning, call 911 for emergency help. Give Naloxone if you have it. Remain with the person and provide CPR if trained and it is needed.
- The [Good Samaritan Drug Overdose Act](#) provides some legal protection for persons who seek emergency support during an overdose.

There are many services across Simcoe Muskoka that offer treatment and support to those living with an opioid addiction. Below you will find a list of resources:

- [Rapid Access Addiction Medicine \(RAAM\) Walk-In Clinics](#)
- [Treatment and Support Service Providers](#)
- [Canadian Mental Health Association - Addiction Services](#)

More information can be found about Xylazine at: [Xylazine \(CCENDU Drug Alert\)](#)

More information can be found about Benzodiazepines at: [Risks and Harms Associate with the Nonmedical Use of Benzodiazepines in the Unregulated Drug Supply in Canada \(CCENDU Bulletin\)](#)

You can also speak with a public health professional by calling Health Connection, 705-721-7520 or 1-877- 721-7520 Monday to Friday, 8:30 a.m. to 4:30 p.m.