

GETTING CANDID: FRAMING THE CONVERSATION AROUND YOUTH SUBSTANCE USE PREVENTION

What You Need to Know About Youth and Xylazine A Guide for Youth-serving Health Care Providers

WHAT IS XYLAZINE AND WHY DO WE NEED TO KNOW ABOUT IT?

Xylazine is a veterinary tranquilizer that is not approved for human use and emerged as a contaminant in the opioid drug supply in 2019.^{1,2} When used in combination with opioids, is known to prolong the euphoric and sedative effects of opioid intoxication. In 2023, the U.S. Office of National Drug Control Policy (ONDCP) declared fentanyl adulterated with xylazine an emerging threat.³

Xylazine is usually found in combination with illicitly manufactured fentanyl, which is the leading cause of teen overdose deaths.⁴ Xylazine may also be present in any illicitly manufactured drugs, such as heroin, cocaine, methamphetamine and pressed pills.⁵

Youth may be exposed to xylazine through accidental or intentional consumption of illicit substances.¹ It is important to note that xylazine is often consumed unintentionally⁵ and cannot be detected by looking at, smelling or touching a substance.

Xylazine (pronounced *zai-luh-zeen*) is sometimes called “*tranq*,” “*tranq dope*,” “*zombie drug*” or “*sleep cut*.”^{1,6}

It may be harder to reduce overdoses where xylazine is involved than overdoses from opioids alone. Naloxone should be given in

response to *any suspected overdose* and rescue breaths should be given if the individual is not breathing normally.⁷ Although naloxone cannot reverse a xylazine overdose, since xylazine is often found with opioids,^{2,5} it can reverse the effects of opioids when both opioids and xylazine are involved.⁷ It is important to call 911 any time you administer naloxone and find follow-up medical treatment for any continued effects of xylazine.

As of July 2023, xylazine is most commonly found in the drug supply in the northeastern and southern United States. However, the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) reports that between 2020 and 2021, overdose deaths where xylazine was detected increased by as much as 1,127% in the south and west.^{2,5}

WHAT ARE THE HEALTH RISKS OF XYLAZINE?

Xylazine depresses the central nervous system and may lead to sedation, difficulty breathing, dangerously low blood pressure and slowed heart rate.⁷ This increases the risk of overdose and death when using substances.⁷

Repeated or long-term xylazine use, whether injected, snorted, sniffed or swallowed, is associated with skin wounds that can require daily care to avoid amputation.^{1,8} Xylazine wounds initially look like small, purple or red bruises, birth marks or blisters and can progress to darkly colored open wounds with necrotic tissue.^{1,9}

REDUCING THE RISKS OF XYLAZINE EXPOSURE

Xylazine Test Strips (XTS) are a drug testing tool used to detect the presence of xylazine in substances an individual plans to use and may be available through local community harm reduction programs or for purchase online from manufacturers.¹⁰ Fentanyl test strips can be used to test the same sample of drugs for fentanyl, but fentanyl test strips alone will not detect any xylazine present.

YOUR ROLE AS A PROVIDER: OVERDOSE PREVENTION STRATEGIES

In 2022, xylazine was found in counterfeit pills in at least nine states.¹ Young people can easily purchase fake or counterfeit pills from the internet, and they are commonly advertised and sold on social media.^{10,11}

ENGAGING WITH YOUTH AND XYLAZINE

Surveys have shown that youth trust health care providers to give them accurate and up-to-date information around substance use.¹² As a health care provider, you have the opportunity to help youth understand xylazine and protect themselves from risks associated with using the drug. Despite the dangers, some people choose to use xylazine and say that it extends the high of opioids and gives them more time before having to use opioids again.^{5,6}

When talking about the risks of xylazine with youth:

- **Use scientific data and share information** about the health risks without sensationalizing.
- **Offer educational resources** to youth and parents/caregivers, such as substance fact sheets about polysubstance use and fentanyl.
- **Use strategies from the [Getting Candid: A Message Guide for Providers](#)** to start effective conversations around substance use.

Keep communication around substances open and ask what youth are seeing in the media or among their peers. Young people may think that overdoses or xylazine exposure only happens to people who frequently use substances or use “street drugs” like heroin. Help dispel myths about drug overdose and increase youth awareness around the presence and risks of xylazine and products “laced” with xylazine.


Share these takeaway messages:

- Xylazine is showing up in combination with fentanyl more and more, increasing the risk of fatalities. Fentanyl is the leading cause of teen overdose deaths⁴ – contamination with xylazine highlights a need for teens to be even more cautious about substances.

- Counterfeit prescription pills can be contaminated with xylazine.¹⁵ Taking pills or other drugs that were not prescribed for you by a health care provider puts you at risk of consuming xylazine.
- Xylazine can cause complicated medical problems, including possible skin wounds, even when an overdose has not occurred.⁷
- Overdoses can happen to anyone and may be harder to reverse when xylazine is involved than from opioids alone.⁷
- Naloxone should be given in response to any suspected overdose and rescue breaths should be given if the individual is not breathing normally.⁷ Although naloxone cannot reverse a xylazine overdose, it can reverse the effects of any opioids present alongside the xylazine.⁷ It is also important to call 911 for medical treatment for any continued effects of xylazine.

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 **[For more information on XTS, check out this infographic or watch this video on how to use the test strips and share this information with other providers and young people.](#)**

For more information and updates on xylazine generally, visit the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention’s (CDC’s) [What You Should Know About Xylazine](#). For a description of the pharmacology of the substance, see the DEA’s [factsheet on Xylazine](#). For up-to-date treatment guidelines, check with your state health department, professional licensing board or peer-review and evidence-based clinical medical resources.

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