

Let's Talk Xylazine

Information for Harm Reduction Workers

What is xylazine?

- Xylazine is a potent, non-opioid sedative, pain-reliever, and muscle relaxant that is emerging in parts of Ontario's drug supply.
- A veterinary medication that is not authorized for human use in Canada because of its severe depressant effect on the human central nervous system.
- Commonly known as '**tranq**' or '**tranq dope**' when combined with fentanyl. It may be added to reduce costs and extend the effects of fentanyl. Xylazine has also been found in other drugs like crystal methamphetamine.
- Effects can happen within minutes of taking the drug and can last 8 hours or longer, depending on the dose and the other drugs in the mix.
- **Drugs containing xylazine can be injected, snorted, inhaled, or swallowed.**

What are the effects of xylazine on the body?

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| • Sedation and/or drowsiness | • Lowered blood pressure |
| • Extreme disorientation | • Decrease in body temperature |
| • Slow or irregular breathing | • Small, constricted pupils |
| • Slowed and/or irregular heartbeat | • Coma |

A concerning effect of xylazine is that it can cause extended blackouts and memory loss, lasting several hours. As a strong sedative, someone can lose consciousness and have no memory of things that happened while under its influence. When mixed with opioids or benzodiazepines, it makes the sedative effect stronger. The risk for prolonged blackouts, and decreased respiratory rate greatly increases. When used with stimulants (such as crystal meth), unexpected drowsiness and blackouts can occur.

Xylazine can impair the ability to feel pain or discomfort putting individuals at risk of freezing, frostbite, heatstroke, and sunburn in extreme temperatures. **The state of impaired awareness and memory loss is a serious safety concern, and can lead to accidents, injuries, and even fatalities.** The sedative state puts an individual and their belongings in a vulnerable situation.

Does xylazine impact opioid overdose?

When combined with opioids, xylazine may increase the risk of overdose and complicate overdose response. Xylazine can increase the effects of other depressants like fentanyl, benzodiazepines, and other opioids, and produce initial symptoms like opioid overdose. This can reduce breathing rate and increase risk of death. Xylazine or benzodiazepines on their own pose a risk of toxicity. There is no approved antidote to reverse xylazine overdose in people.

What are considerations for responding to a xylazine-opioid overdose?

- Remind people to avoid using alone, use at a CTS or with someone you trust. **If using alone, consider calling the National Overdose Response Service at 1-888-688-6677.**
- Xylazine is often mixed with opioids. Naloxone and breaths should be given.
- If someone is breathing, but not awake, more naloxone may not be necessary. Continue to give breaths and naloxone every 3-5 minutes until breathing returns to normal.
- In a suspected xylazine overdose, call 911. It may require more medical attention beyond naloxone. The “Good Samaritan Act” may provide legal protection.
- If sedated and breathing normally, place the person in the recovery position. Continue to monitor them.

Xylazine skin wounds and infections

Use of xylazine-contaminated drugs can lead to skin and soft tissue infections, like abscesses, cellulitis, skin ulcers, and difficult to heal wounds. **Xylazine skin wounds are different from other injection drug-use infections:**

- They heal slower and worsen quickly compared to other wounds. Early care is important.
- They tend to be on the legs, arms, and can appear in areas far from an injection site.
- If untreated, the wounds can worsen and lead to sepsis. Sepsis happens when an infection triggers a chain reaction throughout the body and can lead to death.
- Wounds can also lead to infection of the bone, and in severe cases may require amputation if left untreated.
- If skin turns black, individuals should seek emergency care.
- There are practice-based reports that suggest xylazine-type wounds may appear for individuals who inhale or snort drugs only.

Xylazine withdrawal

Use of xylazine (intentionally or unintentionally) can lead people to develop a physical dependence. Withdrawal symptoms include irritability, restlessness, or extreme anxiety. **It is hard to single out effects of xylazine withdrawal because it is usually mixed with other drugs.**

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Key Messages

- Xylazine is a potent non-opioid sedative often mixed with opioids in the unregulated drug supply.
- When xylazine is mixed with opioids it increases the risk of overdose and complicates overdose response.
- The only way to know if xylazine is in drugs is through drug checking.
- A concerning effect of xylazine is that it can cause extended blackout, extreme disorientation, and memory loss lasting several hours. This is a serious safety concern, and can lead to accidents, injuries, and even fatalities.
- After giving naloxone, people may not wake up right away and sedation can continue even if breathing has returned to normal.
- Naloxone does not reverse the effects of xylazine but should still be given in case of suspected opioid overdose.
- Wounds associated with xylazine use can take a long time to heal and require special medical care. Wounds can appear far from an injection site.
- It's hard to single out xylazine withdrawal because it is usually mixed with other drugs.
- Consider Xylazine is in the drug mixture if excessive sleepiness appears after consuming stimulants like crystal meth, crack, or cocaine.
- Individuals may consume stimulant drugs to try and reduce the strong sedative effect of xylazine. This increases the risk of drug interactions and can lead to fatal overdose.
- Remind people to try not to use alone and use in as safe a place as possible. Test a small amount of drug first: start low – go slow.