

## HALTON REGION PUBLIC HEALTH • Office of the Medical Officer of Health

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TO: Halton Physicians, Nurse Practitioners, Emergency Departments, other Healthcare Providers

FROM: Dr. Deepika Lobo, Associate Medical Officer of Health

DATE: March 7, 2023

RE: Xylazine and Benzodiazepines in the Unregulated Drug Supply

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### QUICK FACTS

- Recent data indicate an increase in xylazine and benzodiazepine presence in the unregulated drug supply in Ontario.
- These substances are often found present with opioids and may lead to symptoms like those associated with opioid-related drug poisonings. However, neither xylazine nor benzodiazepines respond to Naloxone administration.

### KEY MESSAGES FOR HEALTHCARE PROVIDERS

- Xylazine, commonly known as “tranq” or “horse tranquilizer”, is a non-opioid sedative, muscle relaxant and pain medication typically used in veterinary settings. It is not approved for human use in Canada or the United States.
- Xylazine is associated with several harms, including:
  - severe skin lesions (i.e. ulcers and abscesses) with injection drug use,
  - central nervous system depression,
  - respiratory depression,
  - cardiovascular effects (e.g. low blood pressure/ slowed heart rate)
  - death
- Benzodiazepines are classified as central nervous system depressants or sedative-hypnotics. Several benzodiazepines (e.g. etizolam, bromazolam and flubromazepam) have been identified within the unregulated drug supply. Like xylazine, acute exposure to benzodiazepines may cause central nervous system depression, respiratory depression, and death.
- The use of xylazine and benzodiazepines alone is associated with a risk of toxicity, however this risk can increase significantly when these substances are combined with depressants like opioids and/or alcohol.

### KEY MESSAGES FOR PATIENTS

Reinforce harm reduction messaging with patients who use illicit drugs.

- **Careful Use.** Test the effect by using a small amount first and avoid using drugs alone.

Please report all suspected/confirmed cases of [Diseases of Public Health Significance](#) (only report COVID-19 cases occurring in high-risk settings) to Public Health immediately by calling 311, 905-825-6000 or toll free at 1-866-442-5866.

PLEASE PROVIDE A COPY TO ALL PHYSICIANS IN YOUR OFFICE AND/OR POST IN EMERGENCY DEPARTMENTS AND PHYSICIAN LOUNGES. IF YOU HAVE ANY ISSUES WITH THIS ATTACHMENT, PLEASE EMAIL [DOCTORS@HALTON.CA](mailto:DOCTORS@HALTON.CA).

- Use with a friend, avoid using drugs at the same time so that one person may respond in the case of a drug poisoning event.
- Call a friend, family member or the [National Overdose Response Service](#) at 1-888-688-6677 (NORS) for anonymous 24-hour support before and while using substances.
- **Carry [Naloxone](#).** It is ineffective in response to xylazine/ benzodiazepine toxicity but will help with any opioids. It can be safely administered to people who have taken both opioid and non-opioid drugs.
- **Call 911.** In cases of a suspected drug poisoning call 911 and administer Naloxone.
  - Perform CPR while awaiting support.
  - Multiple rounds of Naloxone may be required to respond.
  - The [Good Samaritan Drug Overdose Act](#) provides some legal protection for persons seeking emergency help.
- **Wound Care.** Seek medical support for any unusual wounds or lesions.

Connect patients with additional support services or resources when possible.

- **Naloxone.** Obtain free [Naloxone kits](#) at various locations in Halton.
- **Harm Reduction.** Safer drug use supplies can be accessed anonymously and free-of-charge at:
  - [Exchange Works](#), Halton Region's Needle Exchange Program.
  - [Ontario Harm Reduction Distribution Program](#) (OHRDP). Use the locator map to find safer drug use supplies and disposal sites in your community.
- **Treatment services.** Free and confidential information for patients about opioid treatment options in Halton is available at:
  - [Halton Information Providers](#)
  - [Connex Ontario](#)
  - [one-Link](#)

## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- [Risks and Harms Associated with the Nonmedical Use of Benzodiazepines in the Unregulated Drug Supply in Canada](#) (CCENDU Bulletin)
- [Xylazine](#) (CCENDU Drug Alert)
- The Region's [overdose early warning system](#) enables rapid detection of situations involving opioids that require a public health or community response. [Subscribe](#) to receive monthly reports of opioid activity in Halton Region.