

High risk of overdose from fake medicines

*Information and advice for educational settings

BACKGROUND

Highly potent synthetic opioids have caused a high number of overdose deaths in the UK in recent years. A class of synthetic opioids called nitazenes, which are usually more potent than fentanyl, are the most common currently.

These substances are appearing in fake pain-relief and other medicines. People are buying these medicines from illicit sources, often online retailers, unaware that they can be adulterated with dangerous substances.

KEY FACTS

- Synthetic opioids, like nitazenes, have contributed to hundreds of deaths linked to heroin adulteration, but it is believed that a significant number have involved fake medicines.
- Fake oxycodone tablets, often sold as legitimate brands like Oxycontin or Percocet often contain synthetic opioids. Other fake medicines, like fake diazepam (brand name Valium) and fake alprazolam (brand name Xanax) may also contain synthetic opioids or other dangerous drugs. These are often bought from fake online pharmacies or from online drug dealers.
- People take painkillers and other medicines for different reasons: to come down from a night of partying, to self-medicate for pain or mental health issues, or just recreationally. Users of these substances are generally younger, less likely to understand the risks and be in contact with drug and alcohol treatment services, and they are likely to have lower tolerance of opioids than people who use heroin, increasing their overdose risk.
- Possession of any of these drugs, unless prescribed by a doctor, is illegal, regardless of what the person thought they were buying. Most synthetic opioids are Class A drugs and have a penalty for possession of up to 7 years in prison, an unlimited fine or both.
- The risk of overdose and death is higher if adulterated tablets are taken with other substances like alcohol, cocaine, benzodiazepines or pregabalin
- All licensed online pharmacies based in Great Britain, are registered on the General Pharmaceutical Council's (GPhC) website.
- Naloxone is a widely accessible and effective antidote for opioid overdose.

ACTIONS TO CONSIDER AT EDUCATIONAL SETTINGS

- Include **education** about the risk of buying counterfeit medicines and of overdose by synthetic opioids as part of their **RSHE curriculum when teaching about drugs**. Refer to, and act on, the government's synthetic opioids preparedness [guidance](#) and [report](#).
- Ensure **staff are alert** to risks from drug taking and self-medication, especially opioid overdose and have clear guidelines on how to approach students and respond to parents.
- Schools are required by law to have a **behaviour policy** which outlines effective strategies that will encourage good behaviour. [Guidance](#) is available to support school leaders and staff with managing behaviour.
- Schools and colleges should continue to have regard to [Keeping children safe in education which is the statutory guidance](#). If a child has been harmed or is at risk of harm a referral should be made to children's social care immediately (and if appropriate the police).
- Have clear referral arrangements with your **local children and young people's specialist and your adult drug and alcohol service**, for children or adults who need any help, support or specialist advice in relation to drug use. You can find your local service at [Find drug and alcohol support near you](#) | FRANK.
- Know where to refer **concerned parents** for support. Most **local adult and children and young people's drug services** offer support for parents, and further advice and support for parents is available from [ADFAM](#) to drug treatment and mental health services. You can find drug and alcohol treatment services in your area at [Find drug and alcohol support near you](#) | FRANK and more information for parents can be found at [Advice for parents & carers](#) | FRANK.
- Work closely with your local authority's **Public Health Teams**, to stay connected to other stakeholders, such as health and social care services, police, drug and alcohol treatment services and other education partners (schools, further/higher education, universities, etc.).
- Every local authority has a [Local Drug Information System \(LDIS\)](#) that collects and spreads information on drug-related incidents in the area. Knowing about incidents that can affect your institution can help you be prepared. Likewise, informing of any incident in your institution will help others prepare.
- Explore options to **test** tablets which have caused any harm or are suspicious. Understanding the cause of harm can help people get appropriate treatment and can help public health and law enforcement agencies respond to the problem more effectively.
- **Higher education settings**, especially universities, should seek to ensure that students have the resources, support and knowledge needed to make informed choices on drugs and reduce harm, including in relation to the use of fake medicines. This can include support from the university's welfare, counselling and mental health services, local GPs services, and or the students' union advice services. Staff should be aware of the harms from fake medicines and of referral pathways to meet need.
- Consider having **[naloxone](#) available**. Staff could be trained to carry and administer naloxone.
- If someone is unwell, don't hesitate to get help. Call **111 and 999** if you think it's life-threatening. It is important the person who is feeling unwell is honest with any first responders about what they have taken.

INFORMATION AND RESOURCES

- FRANK offers easy to read information on the risks of using opioids: [Drugs cut with dangerous substances](#) | FRANK
- FRANK has a local drug and alcohol services directory: [Find drug and alcohol support near you](#) | FRANK
- People, including teachers, parents and children and young people can also call FRANK on 0800 776600 or at www.talktofrank.com to find out more and get support
- NHS advice on contacting urgent and emergency care services can be found here [Find urgent and emergency care services - NHS](#)

