

# High risk of overdose from fake medicines

\*Information and advice for local Public Health Teams

---

## 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, 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 are often adulterated 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 unregistered 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.

---

## LOCAL ACTIONS TO CONSIDER

- Be ready to put in place a local or regional [Incident Management Team](#) for outbreaks of opioid overdoses. Refer to, and act on, the government's synthetic opioids [preparedness guidance and report](#).
- Ensure **primary and secondary care** are alert to risks from self-medication, especially opioid overdose, and have a clear pathway to drug treatment services.
- **Mental health services** should use the [ASSIST-Lite](#) to identify drug and alcohol use problems and offer brief advice and referral into drug and alcohol treatment. Treatment should address the drug and alcohol use and mental health issues (such as self-medication) through effective partnerships. Services can find out more about how to identify, prevent and reduce drug and alcohol related harm in the [Misuse of illicit drugs and medicines: applying All Our Health](#) guidance.
- **Drug treatment services** should routinely offer harm reduction, psychosocial and pharmacological interventions to individuals in need. They should routinely ask people who use pain medication or sedatives about what they are using, where they purchase them from and why people use and the triggers, context/function and maintaining factors of use.
- Work closely with the night-time economy (pubs, clubs, festivals, etc.) – including through existing police and licensing contacts – and **education partners** (schools, further/higher education, universities, etc.).
- Strengthen [drug-related death review processes](#) and your [Local Drug Information System \(LDIS\)](#), and improve collaboration between drug services, schools/universities, police, coroners, hospitals and young people's services.
- Consider more widespread **naloxone provision**, including within hospitality venues – if they aren't already, security staff could be trained to carry and administer naloxone.
- 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.
- Services in touch with people at risk should consider the value of [nitazene testing strips](#). They have limitations but may be useful to reduce some risks and to engage people in harm reduction conversations.

---

## HARM REDUCTION

Services should first and foremost help people to avoid using fake medicines. Some people will decide to use them despite the risks. In those circumstances, harm reduction advice is indicated. **Always ensure harm reduction advice is context, risk and age appropriate.**

Use or adapt the following messages:

- The only way to avoid all risks is to avoid using prescription-only medicines that haven't been prescribed to you. If you are self-medicating with unprescribed medicines, talk to your GP or call NHS 111 for advice.
- Don't use alone. Do stay with your friends and have a safety plan for if things go wrong. If you're in a group, don't all use at the same time so there is someone available to help and get help if people go over.
- Start low and go slow. Start with a small dose and wait some time for the effects. The effects of a drug when swallowing can take up to an hour. If someone is unresponsive or is unwell, don't hesitate to get help. Call 111 if you or someone else needs medical help, and 999 if you think it's life-threatening (see Information and resources section) and be honest with any first responders about what you or the person attended have taken.
- Never drive or use heavy machinery and stay away from swimming pools, hot tubs and baths after using unprescribed medicines.
- Have naloxone to hand. This opioid overdose antidote works on synthetic opioids so have it to hand if you're going to put yourself at risk. You can get it from your nearest drug service.

---

## 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](http://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](#)

