



**To: CAHAN San Diego Participants**

**Date: March 24, 2025**

**From: Behavioral Health Services**

**Health Advisory: Xylazine in the San Diego County Drug Supply**

#### **Key Messages**

- Xylazine, a non-opioid tranquilizer, is now regularly detected in the San Diego County street drug supply.
- Xylazine is often mixed with fentanyl and may increase risk of fatal overdose.
- People who use drugs may not be aware that their drugs contain xylazine.
- Xylazine is not an opioid, however, is commonly mixed with opioids. Therefore:
  - Health care providers should acutely respond to overdoses involving xylazine by administering naloxone and providing supportive and symptomatic care.
  - Health care providers should follow up after a xylazine-involved overdose by providing naloxone, talking with patients about the changing drug supply, offering harm reduction guidance, and sharing information about how to access effective treatment for substance use disorder and harm reduction services.

#### **Situation**

Xylazine is now regularly detected in the local San Diego County street drug supply. This health alert communicates information about xylazine and recommended actions for health care providers.

#### **Background**

Xylazine, also called “tranq” or “tranq dope,” is a [nonopioid sedative and tranquilizer](#). Xylazine is often mixed with illegal drugs such as fentanyl. People who use illegal drugs may not be aware that their drugs contain xylazine (1).

Xylazine can increase the risk of fatal overdose by inducing central nervous system depression, causing respiratory depression, bradycardia, and sedation (2).

Xylazine can be swallowed, inhaled, smoked, snorted, or injected into the muscle or vein (2).

Repeated xylazine exposure has been associated with a distinctive wound type. These wounds can pose unique management challenges and may need specialized wound care (1, 3). Of note, these wounds are often on extensor surfaces of the extremities, and in some cases develop in locations distant from injection sites, and in people who used non-injection routes of drug administration (3, 4).

Xylazine has been increasingly found in the illegal drug supply in the United States, initially on the East Coast, then more recently on the West Coast (5), and has been involved in overdose deaths (1).

In San Diego County, the most recent data available indicate the presence of xylazine in the local street drug supply. Since 2020, the San Diego County Medical Examiner has reported 12 deaths involving xylazine, nine of which

occurred in 2023 and 2024. All 12 deaths included fentanyl or fentanyl analogs; half also involved methamphetamine. Among these decedents, xylazine was detected at relatively low concentrations. None of the decedents had the distinctive wounds associated with xylazine. Local syringe service programs, however, have anecdotally observed an increase in skin wounds, characteristic among those exposed to xylazine. One of these syringe service programs also observed that from February to December 2024, 31% of clients who received xylazine test strips self-reported positive results. The San Diego County Sheriff's Office confirmed xylazine in 47 items submitted as evidence to the Crime Lab's Controlled Substances Section in 2024.

## **Actions Requested**

*Response to overdoses involving xylazine or suspected to involve xylazine (1):*

- **Administer** naloxone.\* Although xylazine is not an opioid, it is commonly mixed with opioids, such as fentanyl. Therefore, health care providers should respond as they would to any suspected drug overdose and administer naloxone to reverse the respiratory depression effects of any opioid that might be present.
- **Provide** supportive and symptomatic care.
- **Consult** a medical toxicologist or an addiction specialist, as needed.
- **Call** Poison Control (1-800-222-1222) for patients with suspected or confirmed overdoses involving xylazine for further management advice, if needed.

Providers may also consider ordering toxicology tests specific to xylazine. Note that xylazine-specific testing is not typically available in-house and likely would entail a send-out test to an external laboratory with this capability. Therefore, if it is determined that xylazine testing could help inform ongoing outpatient treatment, then consider ordering this send-out test. As per an American Society of Addiction Medicine consensus statement, the substances included in a patient's routine drug test should be adjusted based on the patient's drug of choice, prescribed medications, and drugs commonly used in the patient's geographic location and peer group. It is generally useful for providers to establish a routine panel based on the most commonly used substances in their treatment population with consideration for regional patterns of use (6).

\*Community-based providers should follow standard emergency protocols, including calling 9-1-1.

*Follow-up actions post xylazine-involved overdose or in patients otherwise determined to be at risk for xylazine exposure (1):*

- **Provide** naloxone; communicate that naloxone should be administered for any suspected drug overdose, and that the effects of xylazine may continue after naloxone administration, underscoring the importance of calling 9-1-1 when witnessing or responding to an overdose.
- **Talk** with patients about the changing drug supply (e.g., adulteration with fentanyl or xylazine), risks for overdose, and risks associated with exposure to fentanyl and fentanyl mixed with xylazine.
  - In addition, for outpatient providers, discuss any results of xylazine testing that might have been ordered.
- **Share** information on how to access effective treatment for substance use disorder, harm reduction services (including sterile syringe access), and other resources and services tailored to their needs.
  - **Offer** medications for opioid use disorder (MOUD) (e.g., buprenorphine, methadone) whenever possible for patients with opioid use disorder.
    - Refer to the [County's Medication Assisted Treatment \(MAT\) and Naloxone Resource Interactive Map](#).

- **Offer** harm reduction guidance, such as:
  - Carry naloxone and know how to use it.
  - Avoid using alone.
  - Avoid mixing drugs.
  - Test drugs before using.
    - Provide patients with information regarding local drug checking resources; these help inform individuals about the composition of their substances to increase awareness and reduce harm. Examples include xylazine test strips and fentanyl test strips.
  - Seek wound care.

## References

- 1) CDC. Xylazine: Clinical Management and Harm Reduction Strategies for Patients. Available here: [Xylazine: Clinical Management and Harm Reduction Strategies for Patients \(cdc.gov\)](#). Accessed October 30, 2024.
- 2) California Department of Public Health. Issue Brief: Xylazine, Health Risks and Harm Reduction Strategies. Available here: [Issue Brief: Xylazine, Health Risks and Harm Reduction Strategies \(ca.gov\)](#). Accessed October 30, 2024.
- 3) McFadden R, Keeshen SW, Straub KP, Hosey RA, Neuschatz R, McNulty K, Thakrar A. Xylazine-associated Wounds: Clinical Experience From a Low-barrier Wound Care Clinic in Philadelphia. J Addict Med. 2023 Nov 29;18(1):9–12.
- 4) Lutz L, McFadden R, Xu L, Bhatia R, Davis MH, Rohacs N, Wei J, Perrone J, Lowenstein M, Thakrar AP. Wound Characteristics Among Patients Exposed to Xylazine. JAMA Dermatol. 2025 Jan 1;161(1):75–80.
- 5) County of Los Angeles Public Health. Health Advisory: Xylazine in Illicit Drugs Increasing Overdose Risks. February 24, 2023 Available here: [LAHANXylazine022423.pdf \(lacounty.gov\)](#). Accessed October 30, 2024.
- 6) American Society of Addiction Medicine. Consensus Statement: Appropriate Use of Drug Testing in Clinical Addiction Medicine. 2017. Available here: [Thomson \(asam.org\)](#). Accessed October 30, 2024.

## Resources

- 1) Refer patients in need of behavioral health resources, including substance use referrals, to the Access and Crisis Line at (888) 724-7240, 9-8-8 or 2-1-1.
- 2) Xylazine test strips are available for purchase commercially. Free xylazine test strips are not yet widely available. However, some local syringe service programs and harm reduction organizations are currently distributing them to individuals:
  - a. County of San Diego's Naloxone Distribution Program ([Naloxone](#))
  - b. County of San Diego Harm Reduction Services Program ([Harm Reduction Services Program | Engage San Diego County](#))
  - c. Some additional programs listed in the California Department of Health directory of syringe service programs for San Diego County ([Directory of Syringe Services Programs in CA](#))
- 3) Free access to naloxone and fentanyl test strips is available via the County of San Diego's Naloxone Distribution Program ([Naloxone](#)). In addition, any member of the public can call 2-1-1 to find out where naloxone is available to them or search for the nearest access point via the [County's Medication Assistance Treatment \(MAT and Naloxone Resource Interactive Map\)](#).

- 4) Quarterly report from the County's Overdose Surveillance and Response Program featuring xylazine as a highlight topic: [San Diego County Overdose Quarterly Report May 2024, Feature Topic: Xylazine and Xylazine-Adulterated Drugs.](#)
- 5) Xylazine alert for EMS professionals: [CoSD EMS Xylazine notification 7 27 2022 Final.pdf](#)

Thank you for your participation.

**CAHAN San Diego**

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