

Massachusetts Drug Supply Data Stream (MADDS) STREET NARCOTICS UPDATE

Counterfeit Benzodiazepines

From November 2020 to May 2021, MADDS detected 23 samples of benzodiazepines (“benzos”) confirmed to be counterfeit in four Massachusetts communities (Boston, Quincy, Gloucester, Lynn). These pills contained benzodiazepines that are not FDA-approved for medical use or sold in the US, or that consisted of “designer” synthetic benzodiazepines, including etizolam, bromazolam, clonazepam and flualprazolam. None of these substances are lawfully prescribed by physicians, and they are not manufactured to approved standards that allow for safe dosing.

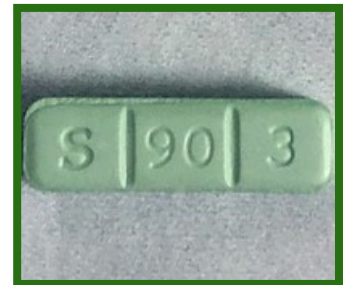
Health Effects

For all benzodiazepines—real or counterfeit—risk of overdose is heightened by co-exposure to other sedatives such as alcohol or opioids, including those used for pain or addiction treatment. All benzodiazepines can produce heavy sedation, slowed or stopped breathing and/or loss of consciousness, possibly leading to death. The speed, magnitude and duration of these effects are heightened by co-exposure to other sedatives.

Benzodiazepines that are not FDA approved for medical use/not sold in the US are not considered safe. **“Designer” synthetic benzodiazepines are not approved for medical use anywhere in the world.**

Identifying Counterfeit Benzodiazepines

Chemically, it is difficult to tell if a pill is a counterfeit benzodiazepine without sophisticated analytic testing. Visually, Xanax (alprazolam), a common benzodiazepine, is typically a green, yellow, or blue bar-shaped pills with imprints of numbers and letters. Counterfeit benzodiazepines are usually designed to look the same as genuine pills. They may crumble easily or become discolored in your hand or in the drug’s packaging.



How to Respond

Summon medical attention immediately. Naloxone/Narcan **will not** reverse the effects of benzodiazepines, but will reduce the dangerous effects of possible co-exposure to opioids. **Always administer naloxone if symptoms present as a possible opioid or sedative overdose.** If benzodiazepines or other non-opioid sedatives are involved, the person may remain sedated after the effects of any opioids are reversed and their breathing is restored.



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MADDS is a state-funded collaboration between Brandeis University researchers, the Massachusetts Department of Public Health, various town police departments and local harm reduction agencies. Contact us with questions or feedback at maddsbrandeis@gmail.com.