

Overdose Deaths still rising with a devastating contributor

The US Centers for Disease Control (CDC) recently released data indicating that in the 12 month period ending December 2022, overdose deaths rose yet again from 109,179 to 109,680, setting yet another devastating annual record. This after a glimmer of hope with the cumulative effect of Naloxone, (the life-saving overdose reversal agent) and the growing availability of fentanyl test strips; overdose deaths which had spiked during the COVID 19 pandemic appeared to begin to “level off”, although still at mind blowing numbers over 100,000 annually.

Just when we may have thought it couldn't get any worse an unknown drug Xylazine, is now being used as an adulterant, (like deadly fentanyl). Xylazine is a tranquilizer used for anesthesia, sedation, muscle relaxation and analgesia (pain relief) in horses, cattle and other animals. It has unknown properties that can result in “flesh eating” side effects that have resulted in amputation in some instances. According to the Guardian news agency, Xylazine is infamous for causing severe flesh wounds that can require amputation. The exact reason for these wounds still isn't understood, but scientists suspect Xylazine could be affecting blood circulation in a way that affects skin repair. That means that for someone using Xylazine, something as small as a pimple or a needle puncture could turn into large sores of dying flesh, in some cases eating through to the bone. Xylazine isn't approved for human consumption is not a controlled substance, meaning it isn't regulated by the U.S. government.

A 2021 study conducted by the Philadelphia public health department found traces of it in samples of “dope” which is a mix of different illicit drugs. It's unclear exactly how many people in Philadelphia were using Xylazine, but in 2021, at least 434 fatal overdoses there involved Xylazine. We know Xylazine has made its way New York and Long Island over the last couple of years as clinicians at local treatment programs have reported working with clients who are nursing some devastating skin wounds undeniably caused by this dangerous drug. Xylazine is not an opiate which means that naloxone will not reverse an overdose however the administration will not cause any harm and may still save a life if there is fentanyl or other opiates involved in the drug mixture.

Last month, Governor Hochul, announced new actions to drive down the spread of the illicit drugs in New York State. The Governor announced that there will be a new effort to supply free Xylazine test strips through the New York State Office of Addiction Services and Supports (OASAS), as well as the Office of Mental Health (OMH). The strips are designed to detect the presence of Xylazine that has been mixed in with other drugs, such as cocaine or heroin. “Xylazine is a dangerous drug that can cause serious health complications, including overdose deaths, and New York State continues to take aggressive measures to address this growing threat,” Governor Hochul said. “These new efforts will save lives and bring much-needed resources to communities that continue to experience the ongoing impact of this crisis. The federal government has also designated Xylazine as an “emerging threat.”

The Office of Addiction Services and Supports is continuing to educate healthcare providers by releasing a new training program on the risks of Xylazine. According to OASAS Commissioner Chinazo Cunningham, “The presence of Xylazine is a growing concern and action needs to be taken to address this issue. We are working to get harm reduction tools into the hands of providers and impacted individuals, which strengthens our efforts to keep New Yorkers safe.”

Advocates continue to urge drug users to never use alone, or if using together not to do so at the same time, taking turns in the interest of safety. In addition everyone in this high risk group should carry naloxone, fentanyl test strips and those for Xyzaline too (when they soon become available). Everyone can help spread the word about the 911 Good Samaritan Law in New York. Individuals are protected by law if they are present when calling 911 for help in the event of an overdose.

A couple of years ago a New York City non-profit called OnPointNYC, opened the country's first two sanctioned overdose prevention centers – locations approved by authorities where people can use substances in a clean, supervised setting without fear of getting arrested. Since opening in 2021, OnPoint's sites have been used almost 70,000 times, during which staff intervened in just under 850 overdoses (about 1.2%) 65% of those "heavily adulterated with fentanyl," says Kailin See, the non-profit's director of programming. Because of how closely they supervise people, OnPoint has only had to call an ambulance 14 times, and nobody who has overdosed there has died. Because it's publicly approved, OnPoint is able to work with the city's health department to track Xylazine rates in the city. "Four or five months ago, we were seeing just trace amounts," says See. But now, "we're starting to see batches that are considerably higher – upward of 25% concentration.

Harm reduction strategies have been both widely embraced (Narcan the opioid overdose reversal drug, needle exchange programs and fentanyl testing strips) and contested including the aforementioned safe consumption sites where consumers use their own drugs while supervised by medical professionals who provide sterile supplies and can respond to an adverse event such as an overdose. The evidence to date appears to be indisputable. Prior to the NYC openings, these safe injection sites have been around for some time in other countries, most notably in Vancouver, Canada where the Insight Program at last report had over 3.1 million injection drug use episodes and despite tens of thousands of overdoses there had not been a single death. This and other measures which may not have wide public support in ordinary times have gained momentum as a result of the explosion in deaths attributed to fentanyl and the desire to "keep people alive long enough for them to find recovery". Overall the harm reduction methods have helped but still not nearly enough as evidenced by the increased rate of overdose deaths again in 2022. Advocates continue to press forward with harm reduction measures reminding others that "people can't recover if they're dead."

Please help spread the word that it is very risky to use any kind of powder or pill form of illicit drugs these days. Help is available 24 hours a day 7 days a week via the NY State OASAS Hopeline: 1-877-8-HOPENY. In addition Long Island has a 24-hour hotline 631-979-1700. For in person assistance, 24 hours a day the DASH crisis and stabilization center operated by the Family Service League (90 Adams Ave in Hauppauge) is staffed around the clock to deal with walk in crisis situations.

For help with an alcohol or other drug issue call: LECSA EAP/MAP 631-851-1295