



SOUTH

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QofM

Question of the Month



What is “tranq,” and what are state lawmakers doing to mitigate its impact?

The opioid crisis has been raging in the United States for several decades and has been exacerbated by the introduction of fentanyl to the recreational drug supply. During the last few legislative sessions, states have taken steps to address the rise in fentanyl-related overdoses and to increase pressure on drug dealers. It’s been a focus of federal policymaking as well.

Recently, the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) authorized the distribution of Narcan (naloxone, an opioid antagonist) for over the counter, non-prescription use to help address the increase in opioid-related overdoses due to the increased amount of fentanyl in the recreational drug supply.

However, an emerging threat – known as xylazine – is increasingly mixed with fentanyl. A sedative approved for veterinary use in the United States, xylazine has

picked up the nicknames tranq, tranq dope, and zombie drug. The Drug Enforcement Agency has reported that it has “seized xylazine and fentanyl mixtures in 48 of 50 States.” In the same release, they note that in 2022, approximately 23 percent of the powdered fentanyl they seized contained xylazine, and seven percent of fentanyl pills contained xylazine. The National Institute on Drug Abuse has collected a small amount of data to suggest that tranq began to show up in the continental U.S. in the northeast and has since spread West and southward. They also note that Puerto Rico appears to be the first place it was introduced in the recreational drug supply. They cite that “From 2015 to 2020, the percentage of all drug overdose deaths involving xylazine increased from 2 percent to 26 percent in Pennsylvania. Xylazine was involved in 19 percent of all drug overdose deaths in Maryland in 2021 and 10 percent in Connecticut in 2020.”*

* Friedman J, Montero F, Bourgois P, et al. Xylazine spreads across the US: A growing component of the increasingly synthetic and polysubstance overdose crisis. *Drug Alcohol Depend.* 2022;233:109380. doi:10.1016/j.drugalcdep.2022.109380

Unlike fentanyl, it is not an opioid-based compound. Because of this, naloxone is not effective at reversing an overdose. However, like natural and synthetic opioids, it can further suppress breathing. According to STAT News – a media company focused on health, medicine, and life sciences reporting, “It’s almost always accompanied by fentanyl – as well as other substances, from cocaine to alcohol – which means it might still be the fentanyl that’s killing people. Some experts have speculated, however, that xylazine is such a powerful sedative that it could exacerbate the respiratory depression that opioid overdoses cause.” **Over extended use, tranq can cause skin ulcers, abscesses, and even necrosis, further complicating treatment options.** Like other recreational drugs, xylazine can result in withdrawal if use suddenly stops. However, at this time, xylazine withdrawal is still poorly understood. Consequently, a standard treatment protocol is still being developed. Both the New York and Philadelphia Departments of Public Health advise treating for opioid withdrawal, given the common overlap, but to also beware that some symptoms may not respond to treatment due to the long-term xylazine use.

Since 2016 there have been 21 bills introduced in state legislatures to change the class of controlled substance for xylazine. Florida first updated their schedule in 2016 with House Bill 1347. West Virginia soon followed Florida in March of 2023 with Senate Bill 546. At the federal level, there has been some conversation about moving xylazine to the current schedule within the Controlled Substances Act and even a Congressional Research Services Report on the options available to restrict xylazine. The FDA has taken actions to reduce the illegal import of xylazine. Additionally, the White House Office of National Drug Control Policy has labeled tranq as an “emerging threat.”

While the federal government can take action, it may take longer than desired for states. Xylazine is an emerging threat that is projected to grow as opioid abuse persists and drug dealers simultaneously try to stretch their supplies while increasing potency. **Faced with these challenges to public health and safety, lawmakers may wish to seek out relevant data on the existing and projected presence of xylazine in their respective jurisdictions and consider crafting policies aimed at curbing the drug’s abuse and misuse.**

Figure 1. Bills Introduced in CSG South States Related to Xylazine, 2016 - Present

