

PHS Health Protection Alert

Title	Description
Event	Bromazolam - novel benzodiazepine circulating in Scotland
Alert reference number	2023/13
Recipients of this Alert and Action required	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Health Protection Team to cascade to Emergency Departments, GPs and OOHs for action • Scottish Ambulance Service operations manager to cascade to staff members for action • Alcohol and Drug Partnerships to cascade to drug and harm reduction service managers (including commissioned services) for onward dissemination and action • Drug Policy Team, Scottish Government • CMO office - for information
Alert status	4. for action - monitoring, wider dissemination and specific measures to be taken by recipient
Date of issue	5 July 2023
Source of event information	Public Health Scotland (RADAR - Scotland's Early Warning System for Drugs)
Contact	<p>p hs.drugsradar@p hs.scot</p> <p>Visit the 'Alerts' section of our webpage: www.p ublichealthscotland.scot/RADAR</p>
Authorised by	Dr Nick Phin, Director of Public Health Science and Medical Director
HPZone context	n/a

Situation

Bromazolam is now the commonest street benzodiazepine (benzo) detected in Scotland, displacing etizolam from pole position. Certain aspects to bromazolam are worthy of bringing to services attention.

Background

Benzodiazepines are depressant (downer) drugs. There are many drugs in this group and some, such as diazepam, are prescribed as medicines in the UK. When taken in high doses (or mixed with other drugs) they can depress the central nervous system and cause respiratory depression. Mixing benzodiazepines with other depressants, such as alcohol, gabapentinoids or opioids, increases the risk of overdose.

'Street benzos' describe benzodiazepines from a non-pharmaceutical source. They are manufactured without quality control and the strength of the drug and any fillers are usually unknown. They are generally pressed into pills and sold loose in bags or may be sold in branded counterfeit packaging.

Different benzo-types have been detected in Scotland in 2023, including etizolam, gidazepam, flubromazepam, clonazolam, flubromazolam and bromazolam. Bromazolam (brom or brum) is a novel benzodiazepine, similar in structure to alprazolam (Xanax). The first detection of bromazolam in European drug markets was in 2016. The first detection in Scotland was in 2021.

Assessment

Reports to RADAR indicate that bromazolam produces strong sedative and sleep-inducing effects, more so than etizolam. It is very potent and in pure powder form, 1 gram is equivalent to 1,000 doses (**TripSit**). Given the limited manufacturing processes used, it is impossible to accurately dose bromazolam powder. A few 'grains' of powder can be enough to cause overdose and therefore it presents a substantial risk.

Bromazolam has been seized in both community and custodial settings in most regions and has been implicated in hospitalisations and deaths in various areas of Scotland. Detections have increased rapidly in the last year, and it was detected in:

- 37% of samples in the ASSIST emergency dept study (February to May 2023)
- 55% of prison benzodiazepine seizures (January to March 2023)
- 14% of post-mortem toxicology samples testing positive for a controlled drug (October to November 2022).

The drug testing service, WEDINOS, has detected bromazolam in samples sent from 11 NHS Boards. Of 49 samples it was detected in, only one was where bromazolam was the 'purchase intent'.

Presentation

- 72% were blue or white circular pills, often half score on one side, generally purchased as diazepam.
- 24% were white, green or teal bars, often stamped with 'XANAX', purchased as alprazolam or Xanax.
- 4% were blue oval pills, purchased as 'up-johns'.

In prisons, bromazolam has been found in paper and powder form, in a variety of colours – tan, brown, yellow, white, grey and pink.

Detection

Testing used by clinical services is varied and bromazolam may not be picked up by existing urine and saliva test kits. Non-detection of benzodiazepines does not mean that these newer benzodiazepines are not present. A person's clinical history is important to determine appropriate prescribing and psychosocial interventions.

Recommendations

- This alert focuses on bromazolam but the information applies to anyone taking benzodiazepines not prescribed to them.
- Overdose signs and response actions for bromazolam are the same as for any other overdose involving depressants.
- The harm associated with bromazolam and other new benzos should be considered in the context of polysubstance use, which is a common feature of drug use in Scotland.
- Services should promote and discuss realistic harm reduction and support measures.

Actions for drug and alcohol service staff

- Services, and Alcohol and Drug Partnerships should share the online alert with local partners who are likely to be in contact with people who take drugs.
- When asking patients about substance use, explain that the contents of street benzos are changing and new substances like bromazolam are becoming more common, it is more potent and that overdose could be more likely.
- Service staff can help people access the drug testing service WEDINOS. Staff should not handle any substances but can facilitate service access by providing printed sample submission forms, stamped addressed envelopes and by sharing online results.
- Provide training on overdose and benzodiazepines. SDF offers a free e-learning course called **What's happening on the streets with benzos?**
- The **benzo harm reduction and prescribing guidance published by the Medication Assisted Treatment (MAT) programme** includes information on the prescribing and the safe and effective delivery of appropriate psychosocial interventions.

Actions for emergency service, clinical and healthcare staff

- All staff working in emergency services and health care should be vigilant for the presentation of patients with benzodiazepine toxicity.
- The commonest clinical features of bromazolam toxicity in the ASSIST emergency dept. toxicology study were reduced consciousness, airway compromise and agitation.
- Testing used by clinical services is varied and bromazolam may not be picked up by existing urine and saliva test kits. Non-detection of benzodiazepines does not mean that newer benzodiazepines are not present, and a person's clinical history is also important to determine appropriate prescribing and psychosocial interventions.
- For further advice, medical professionals can use the National Poisons Information Service 24-hour telephone service on 0344 892 0111, or its online database, **TOXBASE**.

Context

- For more information:
 - World Health Organization: **Critical review report: Bromazolam**
 - Crew: **What is bromazolam? Benzodiazepine information**
- For more information on overdose, visit **Stop the Deaths**.
- For help and support or information on drugs, visit **NHS inform**.
- Benzos giving unexpected effects? Make a report to RADAR. Use our **reporting form** or email **phs.drugsradar@phs.scot**