

Massachusetts Drug Supply Data Stream (MADDS)

Community Drug Supply Bulletin

Counterfeit Benzodiazepines

- From November 2020-May 2021, multiple pills expected to be benzodiazepines (Xanax, “Xanny bars”, “footballs”) have been confirmed to be counterfeit benzodiazepines (n=23). These pills contained benzodiazepines that are not FDA-approved or sold in the US or “designer” synthetic benzodiazepines, including etizolam, bromazolam, clonazepam and flualprazolam. The samples were found in 4 MA communities (Boston, Quincy, Gloucester, Lynn) with most submissions from Boston. All samples were collected in collaboration with local harm reduction programs or donated by police departments and submitted for MADDS testing.
- Pill samples contained benzodiazepines and inactive cuts; one sample had trace amounts of fentanyl detected.
- Benzodiazepines that are not FDA approved or sold in the US, like etizolam, are not prescribed or monitored for quality and thus are not considered safe. Designer benzodiazepines are not approved for medical use anywhere in the world.
- A few user experience reports noted negative health effects: ‘knocking him out’, ‘had bad chest pains’ and three overdoses. Two users expressed that the substance was weaker than expected. User experience included desired effects such as anxiety reduction and sleep aid similar to other benzodiazepines, but with longer lasting effects (6-24 hours), quicker time to tolerance and more challenging withdrawal symptoms that can last days to a month.

How to Identify the Drug

- It’s hard to tell a pill is a counterfeit benzodiazepine without analytic testing. Xanax (alprazolam) are typically green, yellow, or blue bar-shaped pills with imprints of numbers and letters, but counterfeit benzodiazepines may look the same. Counterfeits may crumble easily or become discolored in your hand or in the drug’s packaging.
- If you have suspicions about the makeup of your drugs, contact MADDS about drug checking.

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Health Effects

- For all benzodiazepines—real or counterfeit—this risk of overdose is heightened by co-exposure to other sedating medications such as alcohol and opioids, including those used for pain or addiction treatment. All benzodiazepines can produce heavy sedation, stopped or slowed breathing and/or loss of consciousness.
- If you are concerned about what is in a drug sample, please contact a local harm reduction community organization to get additional advice on safer use and availability of drug checking with MADDS.

Harm Reduction and Overdose Prevention

- If you get pills outside of a pharmacy, use a fentanyl test strip to check if it contains fentanyl. Counterfeit benzodiazepine pills will test negative on fentanyl test strips unless there is a detectable level of fentanyl in it. Pills that are counterfeit may not be evenly mixed, so testing a pulverized pill or more than one part of the pill is best.
- Narcan (naloxone) reverses overdoses involving opioids. It will not reverse sedation from a benzodiazepine.
- The drug supply is unpredictable. It is safer to use when other people are present and can check on you frequently. People using together should take turns to prevent simultaneous overdose. Administer Narcan and call for help in case of overdose or other adverse reaction. You can get Narcan at [harm reduction programs](#) and [retail pharmacies](#) without a prescription.
- Take it slow when using benzodiazepines. If you think it’s counterfeit, take it even slower with smaller doses.
- Watch the order of when you use benzodiazepines. Taking them after opioids or alcohol may increase respiratory depression.
- Using counterfeit benzodiazepines in an overamping/stimulant overdose can be unpredictable and may not lead to a desired comedown.