



Sixty seconds on . . . Xanax

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What's the story?

The *Guardian* recently reported that UK customers account for 22% of global online sales of Xanax (alprazolam) from the “dark web.”¹ The research, carried out by the Oxford Internet Institute, shows that the US accounts for half of all global sales, with Australia and Canada making up 10% each.

Who's buying it?

It's an anti-anxiety drug from the benzodiazepine family, and is being increasingly used by teenagers—some to curb anxiety and others because it's what their friends are doing. Just last week, six girls from a school in London were hospitalised after taking it.

How much does it cost?

In a parliamentary debate in January on the misuse of Xanax, Labour MP Bambos Charalambous said that it was on sale on the streets of his Enfield Southgate constituency for as little as £1 (€1.13; \$1.38) a pill. The drug was brought to his attention by one of his constituents whose daughter became addicted to it.

What are the side effects?

Amnesia, ataxia, confusion, drowsiness, muscle weakness, and aggressive behaviour. Charalambous, who has rapidly become an expert in this area, said the drugs can take effect within 15 minutes of consumption but can last 15 to 20 hours. Worryingly,

overdoses are common because people are unaware of Xanax's potency, which is 10 times that of diazepam. Also, pills bought online can be impure and their strength hard to predict.

Is anything being done to curb the illegal sale of Xanax?

It appears to be a new phenomenon in the UK, where the drug is only available on private prescription, so the authorities are yet to catch up with it. Charalambous called on the UK government to raise awareness of the dangers of the drug, provide more support for people who become dependent on it, and commission research into its prevalence.

Are there any official figures on its misuse in the UK?

Not specifically on Xanax. Misuse of benzodiazepines is not a new phenomenon but data from the Office for National Statistics show that the number of deaths from its misuse has been steadily increasing, from 284 in 2012 to 406 in 2016.²

- 1 Marsh S. Xanax misuse: doctors warn of “emerging crisis” as UK sales rise. 5 February 2018. www.theguardian.com/society/2018/feb/05/xanax-misuse-uk-dark-web-sales-health.
- 2 Office for National Statistics. Deaths related to drug poisoning in England and Wales: 2016 registrations. August 2017. www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/birthsdeathsandmarriages/deaths/bulletins/deathsrelatedtodrugpoisoninginenglandandwales/2016registrations.

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