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Doctors warned over “street benzos” linked to hospital admissions and deaths

Elisabeth Mahase

Doctors have been warned over illicit tablets being sold as the benzodiazepines diazepam, temazepam, and alprazolam that have been linked to recent admissions to hospital and deaths.¹

The alert from Public Health England cited “significant evidence from toxicology results” and advised doctors, paramedics, and emergency departments to be aware of the issue and provide advice where necessary.

Tablets that have been flagged include ones marked with DAN 5620 on one side and 10 on the other, T-20, TEM 20, Bensedin, and MSJ. They may contain “dangerously potent benzodiazepines or their analogues such as flubromazolam, flualprazolam and etizolam.” While they can come in a variety of colours, most of the tablets causing concern are blue and may stain people’s mouths.

The alert said, “Those of you in contact with people who use drugs should be alert to the increased possibility of overdose arising from these illicit drugs sold as benzodiazepines, raise awareness and be able to recognise possible symptoms of overdose and respond appropriately.”

Teenagers, young adults, and dependent opioid users are thought to be increasingly using illicit benzodiazepines.

“Illicit drugs sold as benzodiazepines (often referred to as ‘street benzos’) have been found to contain some very harmful substances and are increasingly reported to be causing hospitalisations and deaths in the UK,” the alert said. “Since the strength and ingredients of these tablets and capsules vary widely, people who use ‘street benzos’ cannot be sure how strong they are or what they are taking.”

Public Health England warned that the packaging of such products “might say pills contain a certain dose of diazepam (often referred to as ‘Valium’) or alprazolam (often referred to as ‘Xanax’) but they may not actually contain any of those substances at all. Instead they may contain other high-potency benzodiazepines or their analogues, or other dangerous substances not for medical use.”

People believed to be at risk of taking these drugs should be told to avoid buying or taking them or any combination of benzodiazepines and opioids, with or without alcohol. If they are going to use drugs they should be told to make sure someone is around them.

“Be extra cautious about the sources from which you get your drugs, and about the drugs you take, [and] test the dose by starting with a small test dose (½ a pill) and waiting at least an hour before taking more,” the alert added.

Alcohol treatment and recovery services have been advised to warn users of the issue, supply naloxone so that it is available for all people at risk of an opioid overdose, and warn other relevant services such as homelessness hostels.

Meanwhile, emergency departments and paramedics have been told to be alert to the symptoms of benzodiazepine, opioid, alcohol, and gabapentinoid overdoses and to treat “as for any benzodiazepine overdose, using appropriate supportive care and the antidote flumazenil as recommended by the National Poisons Information Service,” the alert said.

¹ Medicines and Healthcare Products Regulatory Agency. Evidence of harm from illicit or fake benzodiazepines. 24 Jul 2020. <https://www.cas.mhra.gov.uk/ViewandAcknowledgment/ViewAlert.aspx?AlertID=103075>.