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Three Young Adults Who Consumed Fake Xanax Pills Hospitalized with Serious Injuries Featured in Jan. 5 CDC Report

*Researchers Advise of Increase in Use of Bromazolam Drug and Prompt
Coordination with Public Health Officials, Poison Centers When Patients Present
with Serious Injuries after Illicit Drug Use*

CHICAGO – Three young adults in their 20s were admitted to intensive care units after ingesting pressed tablets of bromazolam disguised as alprazolam (brand name Xanax), according to research published today in the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention’s [\(CDC\)](#) Morbidity and Mortality Weekly [Report](#). Alprazolam, approved by the Food and Drug Administration, is a drug prescribed for anxiety and panic disorders, but often misused recreationally because of its disinhibition and euphoria effects.

According to researchers, in February 2023, three patients, two 25-year-old men and one 20-year-old woman, were found unresponsive approximately eight hours after consuming bromazolam, a “designer” benzodiazepine derivative synthesized in 1976, but never approved for therapeutic use. The patients were later treated at Chicago-area emergency departments for elevated temperatures, seizures, and myocardial injury. All were admitted to an intensive care unit, and the Illinois Poison Center (IPC) was contacted for assistance in evaluation and management. Two of the three patients were discharged after multi-day hospital stays with various medical effects, including aphasia, dysphagia, neurologic deficits, and hearing loss. The third patient was transferred to a second hospital and further follow-up on that patient's condition was not possible.

Researchers noted since its first detection of bromazolam in Sweden in 2016, the drug has persisted in the illicit drug supply in combination with fentanyl and or in counterfeit benzodiazepine preparations. The number of law enforcement seizures in the United States that involved bromazolam increased from no more than three per year during 2016–2018 to 2,142 in 2022, and 2,913 in 2023, according to the researchers. Data from the Illinois Dept. of Public Health (IDPH) reveals in Illinois bromazolam-involved deaths increased from 10 in 2021 to 51 in 2022.

Researchers say although mostly detected alongside fentanyl or other opioids, consumption of bromazolam can be life-threatening even in the absence of other drugs.

Researchers advised and recommended the following actions:

- Essential that physicians, medical examiners, toxicology laboratories, public health officials, and emergency responders be aware of the increased presence of bromazolam, both in polydrug ingestions and in substance use disorder patients who report the use of benzodiazepines.
- Prompt close involvement with public health officials and regional poison centers, given the more severe findings in these reported cases compared with those expected from routine benzodiazepine overdoses.
- Clinicians, responders, and health officials should also consider bromazolam in cases of patients requiring treatment for seizures, myocardial injury, or hyperthermia after illicit drug use, as occurred in these case reports.
- Bromazolam intoxication should also be suspected in patients with a sedative toxidrome who do not respond adequately to naloxone reversal.
- In cases of suspected bromazolam exposure, clinicians should call their poison center for additional guidance. Testing for bromazolam is not routinely available but can be arranged through a variety of send-out reference laboratories.

Multiple organizations contributed to the research for the report, including IDPH, Cook County Dept. of Public Health, Drug Enforcement Administration, and the IPC. Paul Ehlers, MD, and Mike Wahl, MD, of IPC were co-authors of the article featured in the report.

IPC staff and medical toxicologists have contributed to research and co-authored [studies](#) over the years. Last year, IPC research and data were included in a [study](#) titled, “Pediatric Edible Cannabis Exposures and Acute Toxicity: 2017–2021,” which analyzed National Poison Data System data for pediatric exposures to edible cannabis products in children ages 5 and younger between 2017 - 2021.

Calls to the IPC helpline (1-800-222-1222) are free and confidential. IPC experts are available to provide information and treatment advice to the public and medical personnel 24 hours per day, 365 days per year, including holidays. To visit IPC’s website, [click here](#).

To access to the CDC’s Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report, [click here](#). For more information about the risks associated with taking more than one drug intentionally or unintentionally, [click here](#).

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The Illinois Poison Center is a nonprofit health service that provides the people of Illinois with comprehensive and trusted information and treatment advice on potentially harmful substances via a free, confidential 24-hour helpline staffed by specially trained physicians, nurses and pharmacists.