

# BENZODIAZEPINES (BENZOS) IN THE ILLICIT DRUG SUPPLY

FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF PEOPLE WHO USE DRUGS



BRITISH  
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## PRESENTED BY

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# OBJECTIVES OF THE PRESENTATION

As part of today's panel our primary goal is to

**present and prioritize the voices of people who use drugs**

on the topic of benzodiazepines in the illicit drug supply.

We will highlight:

- People who use drugs' experience with an illicit opioid supply contaminated with benzodiazepines
- Perspectives and concerns people who use drugs have around benzodiazepines
- Measures people who use drugs have available to reduce harms and concerns around benzodiazepines
- Benzodiazepine prescribing considerations

# DATA AND INFORMATION SOURCES

## Qualitative interviews and focus groups with people who use drugs across BC (November 2021-February 2022)

- Multi-method study conducted across BC to explore substance use patterns and preferences to inform safer use and safe supply services.
- Data collection tools were developed in collaboration with PWLLE.
- Interviews and focus groups were co-facilitated by the research coordinator and peer research assistants.
- Interviews and focus groups (n=77) were conducted across all health authorities in BC. Pseudonyms were used to identify participant quotes.
- A deductive thematic analysis was conducted to identify patterns and outliers in the data in relation to benzodiazepines.

## Professionals for the Ethical Engagement of Peers (PEEP), BC Centre for Disease Control

- PEEP is an advisory and consultation group made up of people with lived or living experience of substance use (PWLLE) who work with the BC Centre for Disease Control and are comprised of regional representation in British Columbia. With a focus on the strengths and merits of members, PEEP seeks to reduce oppressive conditions that people who currently or formerly use drugs face and emphasize the need for the direct involvement of PWLLE in drug policy, service provision and decision making.

# BENZODIAZEPINE IS CONTAMINATING THE ILLICIT SUPPLY OF OPIOIDS AND CONCENTRATIONS ARE UNPREDICTABLE

- People who use drugs find it challenging to access and use opioids from the illicit supply that do not contain benzodiazepines; many are unknowingly using benzodiazepines and are at risk of developing a dependency before they are aware of the contaminant:

*“So I would say that I also have a benzo addiction. Because - it’s really hard to get stuff down on the streets that does not have benzos in it.” (Ariel, Kelowna)*

*“I found out six months later, I was, like, what do you mean there’s benzos in it? ..... I’m finding that I’m nodding off way more. And then I found out why. It was because it had benzos in it.” (Fiona, Nanaimo)*

- People who use drugs are concerned about the variability/unpredictability of benzodiazepine concentrations, the increased risk of overdose and naloxone not being capable of reversing the effects of benzodiazepines:

*“I am kind of concerned about it ‘cause I don’t really know exactly how much benzos is actually in all of the-- what I’m doing.” (Gabrielle, Victoria)*

*“Once someone is dependent there’s also the danger of them quitting cold turkey because quitting the benzos cold turkey can cause seizures.” (Taylor, Maple Ridge)*

*“Benzos, sometimes it knocks you right out. Nobody can wake you up. And even Narcan can’t really help you.” (Ariel, Kelowna)*

# CONCERNS VOICED BY PEOPLE WHO USE DRUGS AROUND BENZODIAZEPINES

- On top of overdose and withdrawal risks associated with benzodiazepines, people who use drugs emphasize the behavioral and cognitive effects experienced due to the effects of benzodiazepines and how it impacts their lives. Examples include loss of consciousness, loss of memory and psychosis and secondary effects associated with these e.g. vulnerable to robbery and assault – which have important consequences on employment, housing, mental health, etc.:

*“You have these little glimpses of the memory of what happened. And then you’re... on a mat in a holding cell. It’s, like, oh, that’s not something that I think anybody intends to do when they’re picking up any substance, right.” (Evan, Kelowna)*

*“It’s sending people on weird trips and their psychosis is way out there now.” (Focus group 2 Participant, Quesnel)*

*“It’s like what people say – the rob-you dope because if you do the benzos you’re out and people can do anything with you when you’re out on benzos.” (Gabrielle, Victoria)*

# MITIGATING HARMS AND CONCERNS AROUND BENZODIAZEPINES IN THE ILLICIT SUPPLY

- In the present context of a contaminated illicit supply, drug prohibition and limited access to prescribed opioid and benzodiazepine alternatives – people who use drugs have few options for mitigating harms and concerns around benzodiazepines in the illicit supply; one option being drug checking services and benzodiazepine test strips:

*“I test the dope and I know the people that I get it from.” (Parker, Quesnel)*

- However, drug checking services and benzodiazepine test strips are not perceived as accessible, reliable or a realistic option for many:

*“When you’re down at the bottom . . . . ., drug testing places are pointless. ‘Cause...you don’t want to waste even a crumb to go do a test. So it’s Russian roulette.” (Theo, Victoria)*

*“It’s [benzodiazepine test strips] got to be - exactly the right steps for it to be [accurate], you know, you get a false positive or a false negative.” (Tristan, Vancouver)*

# USE AND DEPENDENCY: OPIOIDS AND BENZODIAZEPINES

- While many express concerns around high concentrations of benzodiazepines in the illicit opioid supply, some people enjoy the effects of benzodiazepines in combination with opioids and will seek this out from the illicit supply. For some, benzodiazepines enhance the effects of illicit opioids that may not be meeting their needs in terms of strength, duration of action and desired effects:

*“Usually when there’s benzos in it you get more of the effect that you want. You’re trying to get high...Makes it stronger, right.” (Jack, Quesnel)*

*“People that are still looking for heroin do their benzos because their fentanyl doesn’t knock them out. But the benzos knock them out.” (Focus Group 3 Participant, Vancouver)*

- Despite pandemic prescribing, safe supply and opioid agonist therapy options to reduce peoples’ reliance on the contaminated drug supply, many people now have a benzodiazepine dependency that forces them to seek out and use more illicit opioids to try to find opioids containing sufficient benzodiazepines:

*“A lot of people are wired to the benzos...If they get fentanyl without benzos in it, they’re still sick.” (Focus Group 3 Participant, Vancouver)*

*“I have to take benzos otherwise I’d die.” (Cameron, Maple Ridge)*

# IMPLICATIONS AND FUTURE CONSIDERATIONS



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1. **A safe and regulated supply of opioids, stimulants and benzodiazepines that is accessible and acceptable to people who use drugs, in terms of substances, route of consumption and service delivery, is urgently needed, particularly in light of:**
  - Increasing rates of overdose due to a contaminated supply
  - The continued use of illicit opioids due to pandemic prescribing, safe supply programs and opioid agonist therapy that are not meeting the needs of some people
  - The use of benzodiazepine, to address an illicit supply of opioids that is not meeting some peoples' needs
  - Peoples' use of and dependency on benzodiazepines and the risks associated with immediate or rapid cessation
  
2. **Guidance that advises healthcare providers and people who use benzodiazepines and opioids on:**
  - The severe risks associated with benzodiazepine withdrawal and self-managed and/or sudden withdrawal
  - Titrating off benzodiazepines on to safe supply alternatives
  - Considering the need for benzodiazepine prescriptions for people with an opioid dependency who are prescribed opioid agonist therapy



# THANK YOU!

We would like to respectfully acknowledge that our work was conducted across the unceded, ancestral and stolen territories of 198 First Nations and that the BC Centre for Disease Control and many of the research team members, including Jessica, work, live and play on the unceded, ancestral and stolen territories of the xʷməθkʷəyəm (Musqueam), skwxwú7mesh (Squamish), and sel̓íwítlh (Tseil-waututh) nation.

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