

Benzodiazepines found in Opioids in British Columbia

Across BC reports of benzodiazepines (benzos) and benzodiazepine analogues including etizolam in the illicit drug (opioid) supply continue to increase. Benzos found in opioids increase the likelihood of overdose and the complexity of overdose presentations and response as a result of combined opioid and benzo respiratory depression. Physicians report seeing patients in benzo withdrawal.

Prevalence in BC based on toxicology data

BC Coroners Services



Expedited toxicology found benzos/etizolam was detected in:

50%

of illicit drug toxicity deaths in December 2020 and January 2021¹

Life Labs

More than 60%

of urine drug screening tests in BC that are positive for benzos are positive for etizolam

Always administer naloxone as it works on the opioid

Drug Checking Services



Drug checking shows an **increase** of opioid samples testing positive for benzos. In January 2021:

20%

of opioid samples checked by the BC Centre on Substance Use tested positive for benzos²

50%

of opioid samples from Island Drug Checking tested positive for etizolam or other benzos³

Drug Alerts

More than 10

alerts issued by health authorities across BC between January to February 2021 identified fentanyl with benzos/etizolam⁴

Drug checking and clinical considerations

- Responding to opioid-benzo overdoses is complex. Naloxone temporarily reverses an opioid overdose but **not** benzo effects. After giving breaths and naloxone a person may be breathing normally, but remain unconscious. Thus individuals may receive many naloxone doses prior to hospital transfer and be in discomfort/opioid withdrawal.
- A person may wake up and not remember what happened to them
- Symptoms of benzo withdrawal (e.g. anxiety and sleeplessness) are being increasingly reported and may be difficult to distinguish from opioid withdrawal
- Point of care urine drug tests can detect etizolam⁵ but may not detect all benzos. Some benzos such as alprazolam, clonazepam, temazepam, and triazolam may not provide a positive result.
- Drug checking with benzo test strips can detect some benzos but do not distinguish different types of benzos, concentration or dosage. To reduce false negatives⁶, [shake substances and wait 2 minutes](#) before reading result.⁷ Despite using this method, the sensitivity of test strips to etizolam may be 50-70%.
- Patients should be encouraged to use supervised consumption, overdose prevention and drug checking services if they are available in their community. Refer to the [site finder](#).
- A recently published study in the [American Journal of Psychiatry](#) found that treatment with buprenorphine protects people who use opioids from overdosing, even when the patients also take benzodiazepines,
- Contact [BC Drug and Poison Info Centre \(DPIC\)](#) or [24/7 Addiction Medicine Clinician Support Line \(778-945-7619\)](#) for support

TO LEARN MORE

[Etizolam in BC Illicit Market - Comprehensive Fact Sheet](#)

[Responding to an opioid overdose with benzos or etizolam](#)

1. BC Coroners Service. Expedited Drug Toxicity Findings updated to January 2021

2. BC Centre on Substance Use Drug Checking Report for January 2021

3. Island Drug Checking Monthly Report for January 2021

4. Toward the Heart Alerts for People Who Use Substances

5. Bergstrand MP, Helander A, Hansson T & Beck O. Detectability of designer benzodiazepines in CEDIA, EMIT II Plus, HEIA and KIMS II immunochemical screening assays. Drug Testing and Analysis, 2017, 9, 640-645.

6. Shapiro A, Sim D, Wu H, Mogg M, Tobias S, Patel P, Ti L. Detection of etizolam, flualprazolam, and flubromazolam by benzodiazepine-specific lateral flow immunoassay test strips. BC Centre on Substance Use Drug Checking Benzodiazepine test strip report. July 2020. 1-13.

7. BC Centre on Substance Use. Using Benzo Strips for Drug Checking Guide. April 2020.

8. Moe, J. (2021). Alert! benzos on the rise in opioid overdoses in BC. BC Emergency Network. <https://www.bcemergencynetwork.ca/lounge/alert-benzos-on-the-rise-in-illicit-opioid-overdoses-in-bc/>

9. Purssell et al., (2021). Potent sedatives in opioids in BC: implications for resuscitation, and benzo and etizolam withdrawal. <https://bcmj.org/bccdc/potent-sedatives-opioids-bc-implications-resuscitation-and-benzodiazepine-and-etizolam>