

## What are nitazenes?

Nitazenes are synthetic opioids. They are a part of a group of opioids known as benzimidazole opioids. They were first developed in the 1950's for pain relief but they were never approved for use in humans.

There are different types of nitazenes and some can be injected, smoked/vaporized, or inhaled. They have also been found in powder, tablet, or solution formulations with varying appearances. At least 14 different types of nitazenes have been found so far in BC through drug checking services.

## What are the concerns around nitazenes?

A lack of access to a safe and regulated supply of pharmaceutical-grade substances continues to place people's lives at risk. Nitazenes are being found more often in the unregulated and toxic drug supply across North America and in several provinces across Canada, including in BC.

Some nitazenes are much stronger than fentanyl. When mixed with other depressants (e.g., alcohol, benzodiazepines, ketamine, heroin, fentanyl), the risk of overdose greatly increases. Isotonitazene, which is a type of nitazene, can be injected, smoked/vaporized, or inhaled. It has been found in liquid form, as a powder (yellow, brown or white in colour), or pressed into tablets to make them look like Oxycodone or Dilaudid tablets.

Nitazenes can't be detected on fentanyl test strips because its chemical structure is different from fentanyl.

## How often are nitazenes detected in BC?

Nitazenes were first detected in BC in 2020. They have been found in over 70 samples since then, either in drugs that were seized by law enforcement or in drugs that were tested at a BC drug checking site. It's hard to know exactly how many nitazenes are in the unregulated drug supply since they can't be found on a fentanyl test strip and sometimes they are in too small an amount to be picked up on the tests used at a drug checking site.

## What can happen if someone takes nitazenes or a drug that has nitazenes in it?

Nitazenes are a type of synthetic opioid so it can feel and look the same as an opioid overdose that can happen with fentanyl or heroin. A report from the U.S. states that Isotonitazene (a type of nitazene opioid) has been found to be significantly stronger than fentanyl. Some nitazenes can also make a person feel uncoordinated, confused, or dizzy.

## Does naloxone work on nitazenes?

Yes. Naloxone works on nitazenes. However, you may need more doses of naloxone since some nitazenes can be very strong and in some cases, stronger than fentanyl.

## What should I do if I think someone is having an opioid overdose?

***Always give naloxone. Naloxone will reverse the effects of nitazenes when an overdose occurs.***

If someone is having severe symptoms they need emergency medical care. If you have to leave them alone, place the person in the recovery position on their side to avoid choking. If a lot of naloxone is given it can make a person go into withdrawal, which can sometimes lead to vomiting. Some things that can only be provided in a hospital, like IV fluids, heart monitoring, and help with breathing, are needed to fully recover

Strategies to reduce risks of the toxic drug supply:

- If able, use a different drug supply.
- Use with a buddy who can recognize and respond to overdose with a naloxone kit.
- Drug checking: see [Toward the Heart](#) and [BCCSU Drug Checking BC](#) websites.
- For testing by mail or in person: [Getyourdrugstested.com](#)
- Discuss prescribed safer supply options with your healthcare provider to avoid using the toxic drug supply.

If you are interested, talk to your healthcare provider about prescription alternatives and treatment options.

## References

- Public Health Ontario. (2021). Novel non-fentanyl synthetic opioids: Risk assessment and implications for practice: Evidence brief. Retrieved from: [https://www.publichealthontario.ca/-/media/documents/e/2021/evidence-brief-novel-opioids-risk-analysis-implications.pdf?sc\\_lang=en](https://www.publichealthontario.ca/-/media/documents/e/2021/evidence-brief-novel-opioids-risk-analysis-implications.pdf?sc_lang=en)