What is Xylazine? Xylazine is a X drug used in veterinary medicine. It is an animal sedative used for muscle relaxant and analgesic properties. It is not approved for use in humans by the Food and Drug Administration.1

Illicit use of Xylazine. Xylazine is frequently used as an adulterant in mixtures of heroin, fentanyl and cocaine. It is often used to “bulk” up quantities of these drugs. It can also be used independently and ingested by smoking, snorting, injecting or swallowing.2

Xylazine and overdose reversal. Unfortunately, because Xylazine is not an opioid, it does not respond to naloxone, an opioid reversal agent. That means administration of naloxone to reverse opioid drug involved drug overdoses may be less effective.

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FACTS: Xylazine involvement in Illinois Unintentional Drug Overdose Deaths

- From January 1, 2019 to Jun 30, 2021, there have been 195 unintentional drug overdose deaths involving Xylazine in Illinois. Of these 195 Xylazine involved overdose deaths, 77.9% (152) identified Xylazine as the cause of death.

Demographics of Xylazine involved unintentional drug overdose deaths

- Over three quarters (76.9%/150) Xylazine involved fatal overdoses were among males.

- The largest proportion of Xylazine involved deaths were among 25-34 and 35-44 year-olds.

- Non-Hispanic Whites had the largest proportion of xylazine involved deaths in Illinois.

Fatal overdose circumstances

- Over one third (36.9%/72) of Xylazine involved unintentional fatal overdoses had reports of naloxone administration. Slightly more (39%/76) tested positive for naloxone in postmortem toxicology.

- Nearly all (95.4%/185) Xylazine involved fatal overdoses reported emergency medical services attended the scene. About one-fifth (22.7%) were seen in an Emergency Department prior to their death.

Underlying conditions

- Nearly all (92.8%/181) Xylazine involved unintentional overdose decedents had a known substance misuse problem. Less than a fifth (14.4%/28) had evidence of a mental health problem. Only 4% (8) had reported having an Emergency Department visit in the past three months prior to their fatal overdose.

Conclusion

Xylazine involvement in unintentional overdose deaths is increasing substantially in Illinois. Of unintentional drug overdose deaths involving Xylazine, 77.9% listed the cause of death as Xylazine. The vast majority of these deaths also involve fentanyl. While the opioid overdose reversal agent naloxone was reported to be administered in over a third of these fatal incidents, it was likely not effective because Xylazine is not an opioid and does not respond to naloxone. The majority of those who died by unintentional drug overdose involving Xylazine were male, between the ages of 25-44 years, White and with known substance abuse issues.

Questions or Comments?
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