

Increasing overdose deaths from the impact of xylazine are occurring in every region of the United States, particularly in the Northeast.* There have also been a small number of deaths in the Bay Area and one death in Santa Cruz County. Xylazine is often added to illicit opioids, including fentanyl. Most overdose deaths linked to both xylazine and fentanyl also involved additional substances, including cocaine, heroin, benzodiazepines, alcohol, gabapentin, methadone and prescription opioids.** Since xylazine potentially is an emerging issue in California and poses a greater risk for overdose and serious skin infections, it's important to know how to screen for xylazine and communicate with patients utilizing harm reduction strategies.

Signs of Xylazine Use

- Higher prevalence of skin problems, including abscesses, ulcers and infections than people who are using drugs without xylazine
- Wounds presenting atypically, tending to be on the legs/arms and away from the injection site. **Skin lesions happen even in those not injecting drugs** and worsen more quickly than other wounds
- **Severe infections and necrotic skin ulcerations** with repeated use
- Withdrawal symptoms may include anxiety, irritability, restlessness, severe hypertension, insomnia and dysphoria

How to Communicate With Patients About Xylazine

If you are working with patients who use illicit drugs, consider starting the conversation about whether they have heard about xylazine, especially if you notice signs of use. Understand that individuals may use xylazine knowingly or unknowingly when mixed with other drugs, particularly illicit fentanyl. Xylazine lengthens the euphoric effects of fentanyl, staving off withdrawal symptoms and the need to purchase fentanyl as often for users. Be mindful of the stigma around drug use and added fear associated with xylazine which can make disclosure more difficult. Below are some communication strategies:

- Ask patients gently about atypical wounds and if they are aware of xylazine. For example, "I notice this sore on your arm. Are you familiar with xylazine (or tranq)?"
- Keep the conversation empathetic, non-judgmental and provide options
- Thank the patient if they choose to disclose that they are using or let them know they have the option of not answering if it makes them feel uncomfortable



- Make the conversation patient centered with statements such as “I want to strategize with you because xylazine causes serious health risks”
- Collaborate with the patient to develop an **individualized follow up plan** based on access to clean water, housing status, access to medical supplies, comfort accessing healthcare and comfort with self-care
- Provide **resources** as appropriate:
 - [Health Services Agency Syringe Services Program \(SSP\)](#)
 - [SafeRx Naloxone Directory](#)
 - Never Use Alone hotline: 800-484-3731 (English), 800-928-5330 (Spanish)
 - [Health Services Agency Substance Use Disorder Services](#)
 - [SafeRx Medication Assisted Treatment Directory](#)
 - [HSA Homeless Persons’ Health Project](#)
- Even though naloxone is not effective against xylazine, **reinforce the importance of naloxone** to counter the effects of opioids
- **Educate about wound care** and provide gloves and hand sanitizer for those unable to regularly access hand washing, as well as individual saline, gauze, wraps and ointment
- Provide other basic **harm reduction messaging**, such as:
 - Go slow. Use less.
 - Try to avoid using alone (Never Use Alone hotline)
 - Because of the heavy sedation, be aware of your surroundings and your possessions
 - If using in a group, stagger use so someone is always alert
 - Carry and use naloxone
 - Call 911, be aware that a xylazine overdose may need more than naloxone
 - Be sure the airway is open, as breathing may be blocked in slumped positions

***See [HSA Public Health Alert: Presence of Xylazine in Illicit Fentanyl](#) (includes actions requested of healthcare providers)**

For More Information:

- [University of Pittsburgh and Boston Medical Center wound care guide \(English, Spanish\)](#)
- [SafeRx xylazine webpage](#)

* **National Institute on Drug Abuse:** <https://nida.nih.gov/research-topics/xylazine>

** **White House Press Release:** <https://www.whitehouse.gov/ondcp/briefing-room/2023/04/12/biden-harris-administration-designates-fentanyl-combined-with-xylazine-as-an-emerging-threat-to-the-united-states/>