



Synthetic Opioids

PREPAREDNESS PLAN FOR NSW



PREVENT OVERDOSE,
SAVE LIVES

Opioid overdose crisis looms

NSW is facing a synthetic opioid overdose crisis. Our communities have already endured multiple clusters of overdoses this year. Detections of potent synthetic opioids at our borders have been increasing at an alarming rate.¹

Synthetic opioids like fentanyl and nitazenes are far stronger than heroin and able to cause overdose in miniscule amounts.² As little as two milligrams of nitazenes can be enough to cause overdose and death.³

In an new alarming trend, synthetic opioids are being mixed in with other drugs. Nitazenes have been found in drugs sold as cocaine, MDMA, heroin, ketamine and pharmaceutical drugs such as benzodiazepines.⁴ This puts everyone who uses drugs at risk of harm.

In recent months, health departments in NSW, the ACT, Victoria, South Australia and Queensland have all issued public drug alerts following nitazenes-related harms including deaths.⁵

In the United States, fentanyl and other synthetic opioids have driven a wave of overdose deaths, including more than 100,000 in 2021 alone.⁶

European countries and the UK are now experiencing increasing numbers of deaths related to nitazenes,⁷ including 176 deaths reported by the UK National Crime Agency.⁸

The 2024 UN World Drugs Report reported a sharp reduction in opium production in Afghanistan in recent years, and is predicting that this shortage will drive increased global prevalence of synthetic opioids.⁹

NSW has been lucky to avoid the worst of the global synthetic opioid crisis to this point but we need immediate action from our government, alcohol and other drugs services and the community to prevent an unprecedented spike in overdoses and deaths.

A plan for urgent action

This plan outlines simple, effective steps the NSW government should take to help protect the people of NSW. We know what is at stake, and what it will take to prevent a synthetic opioids overdose crisis and save lives.

We're at our best when we're taking care of ourselves and one another, no matter what we might look like, where we come from or what drugs we might use.

Our choice now as a society is whether we take action with urgency to prevent this crisis. The cost of inaction will be measured in human lives.

¹ Australian Federal Police, 2024, 'Rising imports of potent drug nitazene raises concern,' media release.

² National Centre for Clinical Research on Emerging Drugs, 2024, *Emerging drug briefing: Increasing reports of nitazene toxicity in Australia*.

³ Paula Hudson, Australian Federal Police Commander, verbal comment to ABC 7:30 Report July 3 2024.

⁴ National Centre for Clinical Research on Emerging Drugs, 2024, *Emerging drug briefing: Increasing reports of nitazene toxicity in Australia*.

⁵ National Centre for Clinical Research on Emerging Drugs, 2024, *Emerging drug briefing: Increasing reports of nitazene toxicity in Australia*.

⁶ Adam Holland et al, 2024, 'Nitazenes—heralding a second wave for the UK drug-related death crisis?' in *The Lancet Public Health*, 9:2.

⁷ European Union Drugs Agency, 2024, 'Drug induced deaths - the current situation in Europe,' in *European Drug Report 2024*, European Union.

⁸ David Cowan, 2024, 'Dangerous nitazene drugs linked to rise in deaths,' BBC.

⁹ United Nations Office of Drugs and Crime, 2024, *World Drugs Report: Key findings and conclusions*, United Nations.



Synthetic Opioids Preparedness Plan

IMMEDIATE PRIORITIES

The NSW Government should move immediately to implement the following measures to manage the risk of a synthetic opioid overdose crisis.



Increase public awareness and capacity to respond

A public communications campaign is urgent to develop community support and participation in preventing and managing overdose. The campaign should include targeted communication to high-risk populations, as well as the general public.



Establish publicly accessible drug checking services

Pill testing services accessible to diverse drug-using populations will identify high-risk substances prior to consumption, educate consumers on managing the elevated risks of using drugs, and provide expanded real-time data on drug markets to NSW Health's existing monitoring and public alert system.



Increase distribution of naloxone

The increasing prevalence of synthetic opioids and their presence in a diverse range of drugs means that naloxone distribution and training must also be expanded, including developing strategies to reach people who use non-opiate drugs and emergency services including police. Existing naloxone users will need access to more naloxone and education because the potency of synthetic opioids means multiple doses of naloxone may be required to reverse an overdose.



Educate and train emergency and other frontline workers

Alcohol and other drugs services and emergency health services will be at the forefront in managing a synthetic opioid overdose crisis. Other public service workers, including police, public transport staff and council rangers, will often be the first to encounter people experiencing overdose. Training workers in the emergent threat and how to respond is urgent.

ESTABLISH AN EXPERT PANEL TO ADVISE NSW HEALTH

The NSW government should establish an Expert Panel to advise NSW Health on the ongoing refinement and implementation of a Synthetic Opioids Preparedness Plan. The panel should include representatives from health, including non-government AOD organisations, police and key population groups including people who use drugs.

BUILD RESILIENCE AND CAPABILITY FOR THE LONG TERM

The NSW Government must initiate the following longer-term actions to increase resilience and capability of the community and the AOD treatment system to manage a synthetic opioid overdose crisis in the long term.



An alcohol and other drugs strategy for NSW

It has been more than 10 years since NSW had an alcohol and other drugs (AOD) strategy to support and guide policy. The Special Commission into the Drug 'Ice' observed that 'in this time, there has been a clear lack of direction for AOD health services, and significant gaps in services for people who need treatment, rehabilitation and support.'¹⁰ The emergence of this new synthetic opioids crisis underscores the need for urgent action from the government to develop an alcohol and other drugs strategy for NSW.



Expand AOD treatment, prevention and harm reduction service access

In the 10 years to 2022-2023, NSW consistently reported the lowest rate of participation (per 100,000 people) in AOD treatment services of any Australian jurisdiction.¹¹ In addition, recent analysis of Australian government spending on responses to illegal drugs has shown that despite the effectiveness of harm reduction it receives less than less than 2% of total government spending, and prevention and early intervention programs, like in-school education, receive less than 7%.¹² In spite of new government funding for treatment services announced in response to recommendations from the Special Commission into the Drug 'Ice', the NSW Government has not yet committed to funding the AOD system at a level able to meet community demand. It is crucial that people can access the support they need, particularly in the context of elevated risks of drug use due to increased prevalence of synthetic opioids.



Housing First

Homelessness is associated with increased mortality from accidental drug and alcohol poisoning.¹³ The Special Commission into the Drug 'Ice' recommended that the NSW government provide 'no-barrier housing, primary and mental health and psychosocial supports to help address drug-related harms in the homeless population,' and 'ensure that social housing tenants who undertake residential drug rehabilitation or detoxification do not lose their housing while undergoing treatment.' The emergent synthetic opioid overdose crisis increases the urgency for the government to prioritise this Housing First approach.

¹⁰ Dan Howard, 2020, *Special Commission of Inquiry into crystal methamphetamine and other amphetamine-type stimulants, Report - Volume 1*, NSW Government.

¹¹ Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2024, *Alcohol and other drug treatment services in Australia annual report*, Australian Government.

¹² Alison Ritter et al., 2024, *The Australian 'drug budget': Government drug policy expenditure 2021/22*, UNSW Drug Policy Modelling Program.

¹³ W David Bradford, et al., 'Higher rates of homelessness are associated with increases in mortality from accidental drug and alcohol poisonings,' in *Health Affairs*.

