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'Puts us on notice': New Mexico Department of Health IDs 'Tranq' in 3 fentanyl samples

By Gregory R.C. Hasman / Journal Staff Writer

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The New Mexico Department of Health issued a news release Monday confirming the presence of Tranq in three fentanyl samples tested through the state's Adulterant Checking Program.

Xylazine, also known as Tranq Dope, is a nonopioid sedative or tranquilizer, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

DOH spokesman David Morgan said xylazine was found in samples received over the past two weeks — not associated with overdoses — that were tested at its Albuquerque and Española testing sites.

Tranq is not just a state issue, but a national one. In 2023, the Biden administration called it an “emergency threat” to the country and outlined a national response plan to tackle the issue.

“We’ve been well aware of fentanyl mixed with xylazine for at least several months now,” Dr. James Besante, Santa Fe Recovery Center chief medical officer, told the Journal. But “the situation is bad and getting worse.”

According to the CDC, the presence of xylazine in drugs tested in labs increased in every region of the United States from 2020-2021. About a year ago, the Journal reported there had been “at least” two cases of xylazine “popping up” in the New Mexico drug market.

In March, U.S. Sens. Tim Kaine, D-Va., and Ted Cruz, R-Texas, co-sponsored a bill that would require the State Department to include Tranq in its annual international narcotics control strategy report, according to both senators’ websites.

Each state: “Requiring the State Department to actively report on this emerging threat would ensure that the United States is better prepared to counter and respond to trends in the international drug trade contributing to America’s drug crisis.”

‘An accelerant on an overdose fire’

Morgan said xylazine is often used in veterinary medicine and is not approved for human use, but it has been commonly found with heroin and illicitly manufactured fentanyl in the eastern United States for years.



Dr. James Besante
Santa Fe Recovery Center

“But this is the first time it has been officially identified in the state,” he said.

“Xylazine is simply an accelerant on an overdose fire that’s raging across the state,” Besante said.

Besante said Tranq can come in any color, shape or size and can “prolong the high people experience.”

“It’s a substance most people don’t know they are using,” he said.

Xylazine not only can cause sedation, drowsiness, slurred speech and disorientation, but it could cause skin ulcers that may become life-threatening if left untreated, Morgan said.

‘Puts us on notice’

Department of Health Cabinet Secretary Patrick Allen said in the news release that the identification of xylazine “puts us on notice that an already dangerous drug supply has gotten that much more deadly.”

He added, “Proactive measures like our Adulterant Checking Program serve as vital tools in our efforts to protect public health and empower individuals to make informed decisions about substance use. Still, there’s no substitute for effective treatment and long-term recovery.”

Morgan said the Adulterant Checking Program began in 2023, and it allows people accessing services through the Harm Reduction Program to bring in small amounts of a substance to be tested to determine its contents before use.

“We were hopeful xylazine would not find its way into New Mexico,” said Joshua Swatek, New Mexico Department of Health Hepatitis and Harm Reduction program manager. “However, the Adulterant Checking Program exists in part to identify new drugs in illegal substances in real time. That has the potential to save lives.”

Morgan said the Department of Health recommends the following tips to reduce overdose risk and death:

- Call 911.
- Carry naloxone and know how to use it: “The most important factor to check for when responding to a suspected xylazine-involved overdose is restored breathing rather than wakefulness,” Morgan said. “The individual may still remain sedated for a time because of the effect xylazine has on humans.” He said

naloxone

- can be ordered for free.
- Know how and when to perform mouth-to-mouth CPR.
- Avoid mixing substances.
- Use xylazine test strips where available.

The situation “underscores the importance of public education and expanded access to treatment,” Besante said.

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DOH Secretary Patrick M. Allen