
Risk of overdose and death associated with counterfeit pills

The Direction régionale de santé publique du CIUSSS du Centre-Sud-de-l'Île-de-Montréal (DRSP de Montréal) is concerned about risk of overdose and death associated with counterfeit pills. This phenomenon is not new, but since the end of October, 3 deaths linked to presumed consumption of counterfeit pills were reported. Pills displaying similar aspect than pharmaceutical opioid tablets were analyzed. They contained nitazenes, which are synthetic opioids 20 to 25 times more toxic than fentanyl.

It is often impossible to distinguish counterfeit pills from pharmaceutical tablets based on appearance because they look very similar. All pills bought on the black market can contain a substance (or mixture) other than what is expected. Risks of overdose and death are high for people who unknowingly take nitazene opioids.

Regardless of the substance used, naloxone is indicated when a person

- **has difficulty breathing, makes a snore-like gurgling noise or is not breathing at all;**
- **has no reaction to sound or pain stimuli.**

The person may have cyanosis (bluish lips and fingernails) and miosis (pinpoint pupils). These symptoms are likely to progress to *cardiopulmonary arrest*. In case of overdose, call 911 immediately for a rapid and effective intervention and administer naloxone if available. Hospital care may be required for naloxone administration under medical supervision or for airway management.

The DRSP de Montréal urges street-drug users to be careful, **regardless of consumption method** (orally, inhalation, injection or others), and encourages clinicians and care providers to increase overdose prevention interventions targeting users:

1. Inform street-drug users of the risks associated with consuming counterfeit pills.

2. Provide counselling on safer drug use practices:

- Use [drug checking services](#).
- Use [supervised consumption services](#) regularly.
- **Avoid using alone** (or, notify someone and stay in contact while taking the substance, e.g. telephone).
- When using with other people, **don't all use at the same time**.
- **Reduce the dose of a drug to test its effects.**
- **Have naloxone close at hand** in large enough quantities and know how to use it if someone shows signs of overdose. In case of doubt, don't hesitate to use it (not dangerous even if it isn't necessary).
- **Call 911** if there is an overdose (the *Good Samaritan Drug Overdose Act* provides immunity from simple possession charges for anyone who calls 911 about an overdose).

3. Inform and, if needed, accompany users so they can obtain naloxone for free in pharmacies and community organizations listed in the [INSPQ directory](#).

We urge you to be vigilant and to inform us of any unusual situation by using the [fiche de signalement de surdose](#).

For more information:

[DRSP – Surdose | CIUSSS du Centre-Sud-de-l'Île-de-Montréal \(ccsmtlpro.ca\)](#)

Source: Direction régionale de santé publique du Montréal – CIUSSS du Centre-Sud-de-l'Île-de-Montréal 514-528-2400
