

Alprazolam (Xanax) - What are the Facts?

March 2019

Background

Over the past year, there has been increasing media coverage about alprazolam (typically referred to by the brand name Xanax), highlighting what is being seen as a rise in the number of young people using it. Most of the media reports have described individual cases or reports from treatment services, and there has been little discussion of the research evidence or the actual data.



1-Red Devils

As with all media coverage which highlights potential changes in drug trends, there is a risk that the evidence isn't clearly presented or even available, and that **raising the profile of a particular drug can inadvertently increase interest from some drug users.**

What is alprazolam?

Alprazolam is a medicine in the [benzodiazepine family](#) of drugs. Benzodiazepines are most commonly prescribed for the treatment of anxiety and insomnia, and they are also prescribed to control seizures caused by epilepsy.

The most frequently prescribed benzodiazepine in the UK is diazepam, known by the tradename Valium. In comparison, alprazolam is a faster acting drug and is about 10 times stronger, meaning that it can rapidly cause feelings of sedation.

Like other benzodiazepines, alprazolam can cause problems when taken without medical supervision. In the short term, its misuse can cause over-sedation, collapsing and overdose. Longer-term use can

NB – not all pills, tablets and capsules look like the pictures in this briefing. The same name can look completely different or be used for a completely different substance. These are just examples.

lead to physical dependence and severe withdrawal upon reducing or stopping use.



2-Blues

Furthermore, taking any benzodiazepine with alcohol and/or other drugs increases the risk of harm. This is particularly the case when benzodiazepines are mixed with other sedative drugs.

Alprazolam is not available from the NHS, but can be obtained on a private prescription in the UK. Illicit alprazolam, normally in the form of counterfeit Xanax tablets, can be bought from street level drug markets and is also available to purchase from illegal websites and social media apps.

Risks

There have been a growing number of personal stories reported in the media, often about [young people who have developed problems with alprazolam \(Xanax\)](#), as well as anecdotal reports that they are self-medicating for anxiety issues.

The use of alprazolam (Xanax) is portrayed in the media as a major epidemic among young people and there is some evidence that prevalence is increasing. We have to be careful about communications and messages, as we can raise interest in a drug and make an epidemic a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Preliminary hospital admission data in England for 2017 indicates that there has been an increase in the number of people aged under 20 admitted to hospital with benzodiazepine poisoning. Over the same period, enquiries to the [National Poisons Information Service](#) about the treatment of alprazolam poisoning have increased substantially. UK police seizures data for drugs that were submitted for forensic analysis show that the number of alprazolam seizures was far greater in 2017 than in previous years, increasing from fewer than ten seizures in 2016 to over 800 in 2017.

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Many of the Xanax tablets available on illicit markets are not of pharmaceutical grade, but are in fact counterfeit. This is a major concern because these **counterfeit products may contain very variable amounts of alprazolam, increasing risks associated with the drug.** Counterfeit Xanax has also been shown to sometimes contain other drugs and/or potentially dangerous adulterants.

Information we have received from [TICTAC](#) drug analysis laboratory, has confirmed that samples produced to look like real Xanax tablets actually contained other drugs such as etizolam, which is another benzodiazepine linked to a large number of [deaths in Scotland](#). TICTAC also found that 'fake' tablets that did contain alprazolam varied greatly in strength, with **some tablets having more than 10 times the normal dose of an authentic Xanax tablet.**



3-Blues

The unpredictability of dose can be very dangerous to drug users who will not be able to judge how much alprazolam (or other substituted drugs) the tablets contains until after they have consumed it and are experiencing harmful effects.

What is being done?

Nationally, Public Health England (PHE) are piloting [Report Illicit Drug Reactions](#) (RIDR), an online reporting system for harm caused by illicit drugs, particularly new psychoactive substances (NPS). This system also captures the harms caused by misused medications, such as alprazolam.

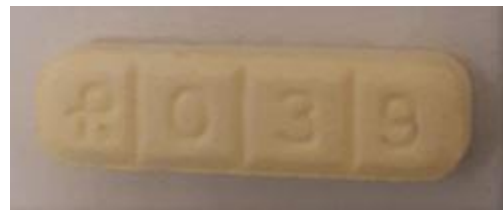
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When new drugs or patterns of use emerge, the particular health consequences associated with them may not always be fully understood at first. For example, the bladder problems caused by ketamine were not originally recognised until different treatment services began to join the dots and find the link between the two. RIDR seeks to speed up the identification of harms, so that health and treatment services can rapidly deliver the most appropriate interventions. PHE encourages frontline staff to use RIDR to report clinical harms they are seeing in their local areas. This helps build a better understanding of the emerging problems and their geographical distribution.

PHE holds a quarterly clinical network meeting with experts on new drugs and emerging drug trends, which provides the opportunity to discuss data from RIDR, the latest NPS-related research, and other sources. After each meeting, they update the RIDR [dashboard](#) to log current issues and concerns. Alprazolam has featured on the dashboard since September 2017.

What are we doing in Cornwall & Isles of Scilly?

In addition to this briefing, our treatment services have responded to this emerging pattern of use by learning more, training their staff, producing information for young people, raising awareness of the problem locally, and offering advice, support and treatment to young people having problems.



4-Yellows

We have pulled together a briefing on alprazolam for professionals and the public (see below) which we are disseminating.

We seek to ensure that staff working in services in contact with vulnerable groups are well-informed; and support the development of appropriate responses.

It is especially important that any local communications to professionals and young people are proportionate so that they raise

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awareness and knowledge without driving up interest and drug-seeking.

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