

Clinical Update: January 2022

Unpredictability of Counterfeit Drugs

Novel Psychoactive Substances (NPS) are developed to bypass controlled drug legislation and evade detection by traditional drug testing methods. In many cases they are labelled as “research chemicals” and/or “not for human use.” A new trend is to package NPS as counterfeit versions of common prescription drugs in an effort to make the unauthorized possession of these substances seem less suspicious. The most observed counterfeit exhibits seized by law enforcement are mimics of common prescription opiates, benzodiazepines, and stimulants. These pose a particular danger for pain management or behavioral health patients if ingested, as the tablets rarely, if ever, contain the drug they are intended to mimic. In addition to these patient groups, other individuals who are not under active medical care may purchase counterfeit drugs over the internet for non-medical use. The information provided below is a limited sampling of counterfeit drugs which have been seized by law enforcement.

Counterfeit Opioids

In most cases, counterfeit opioids are made to resemble oxycodone, hydrocodone/acetaminophen, or oxycodone/acetaminophen dosage forms and rarely, if ever, contain the mimicked drug. Currently, the most commonly observed counterfeits are counterfeit oxycodone 30mg tablets.



Counterfeit oxycodone containing fentanyl¹



Counterfeit hydrocodone/acetaminophen containing fentanyl and promethazine²

Counterfeit Benzodiazepines

The most commonly encountered counterfeit benzodiazepine is alprazolam, with the contents of the tablet varying significantly. In most cases they contain a designer benzodiazepine(s), such as flualprazolam^{1,3} but, in select cases, they have been found to contain opioids such as IMF⁴. For the opioid-naïve individual, this poses a significant risk for overdose.



Counterfeit alprazolam containing flualprazolam¹



Counterfeit alprazolam containing etizolam and fentanyl⁴



Counterfeit diazepam containing flubromazolam and diazepam⁵

Counterfeit Stimulants

There have been numerous reports of large quantities of counterfeit amphetamines seized by the DEA¹. In most cases they contain methamphetamine instead of the intended amphetamine, but they have contained cocaine as well as IMF in some cases. As with counterfeit benzodiazepines, in an opioid-naïve individual, the presence of IMF may lead to an overdose.



Counterfeit amphetamine containing methamphetamine¹

In many cases, counterfeit versions of the medications look nearly identical to the substance they are intended to mimic. This can lead to accidental exposure to dangerous drugs, such as IMF. It is important to stress that patients only take their medication which is directly obtained from a licensed dispenser, such as a pharmacy. Any drug obtained from any other source may be a counterfeit and lead to dire circumstances if ingested.

Aegis' test offerings are developed to allow providers the ability to identify potentially problematic substance use and afford them the opportunity to provide more informed care and minimize the potential for these unregulated substances to contribute to adverse events, including overdose deaths. NPS testing is offered for both urine and oral fluid specimen types.

NOTICE: The information above is intended as a resource for health care providers. Providers should use their independent medical judgment based on the clinical needs of the patient when making determinations of who to test, what medications to test, testing frequency, and the type of testing to conduct.

References:

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