Scattered reports have surfaced about a new drug of abuse with potential for causing serious effects. We are not aware of any cases in Nebraska, Wyoming or the surrounding states, but this notice is being sent to alert clinicians that phenazepam use may spread to our region.

Phenazepam is a benzodiazepine that was developed in the Soviet Union. It is used in Europe as an anxiolytic, anticonvulsant, and muscle relaxant.

Although not used therapeutically in the US, it can be purchased on the internet as a powder for “laboratory research.”

European studies suggest peak absorption occurs by 4 hours and half-life is around 60 hours.

One of the NY poison centers informed us of a teenager who developed slurred speech and ataxia after snorting what he believed to be phenazepam powder. He became agitated and violent, requiring intubation for 24 hours. Urine drug screen was positive for THC and benzodiazepines, but other substances may have been abused.

The Kentucky poison center had a patient with CNS depression that lasted for a week.

According to media reports, a Georgia teenager was found dead in August after friends said he took phenazepam with Oxycontin.

Based on our experience with other long acting benzodiazepines, treatment should focus on ensuring an adequate airway, general supportive care, and evaluation for coingestants.

Because exposure is expected to occur in individuals obtaining drugs through the internet, other substance abuse should also be suspected. Drug abusers sometimes use benzodiazepines to “take the edge off”, or otherwise modify the effects of amphetamines and other stimulants.

As with other unknown ingestions, we would caution against the use of flumazenil, as this might precipitate seizures from a coingestant which would then be difficult to control.

Please call us if you see patients who have abused this drug, so we can better track the growth of this trend for public health purposes and provide optimal care for our patients.