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From: Ron Kirschner, MD, Medical Director
To: ALL HEALTH CARE PROFESSIONALS
Subject: Benzimidazole opioids – a new family of synthetic drugs
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- In 2020 a new sub-class of highly potent synthetic drugs was identified in the U.S. – benzimidazole opioids (BO) including etonitazene, isotonitazene, metonitazene, and others.
- The “nitazene” compounds are structurally different than morphine or fentanyl, and they are not detected by standard opiate screens.
- These drugs can be identified by specialized reference labs such as NMS (Horsham, PA).
- The potency of metonitazene (most potent in the sub-class) is comparable to that of fentanyl.
- Fatalities involving BO drugs have been reported in multiple US states (CO, FL, IA, IL, IN, MN, NY, OH, PA, SC, TN, WI, and WY), often with other opioids and/or benzodiazepines also present.
- Isotonitazene was made a Schedule 1 drug by the DEA in 2020; metonitazene and other analogs were added in 2021.
- BO intoxication does respond to naloxone; higher doses may be required than for reversing heroin-induced respiratory depression.

References

- Calello DP. Identification of a novel opioid, N-piperidyl etonitazine in patients with suspected opioid overdose. *Clin Toxicol* 2022 <https://doi.org/10.1080/15563650.2022.2084406>.
- Krotuski AJ. Metonitazene in the U.S - forensic toxicology assessment of a potent new synthetic opioid using liquid chromatography mass spectrometry. *Drug Test Anal* 2021; 13:1697-1711.
- Montanari E. Acute intoxications and fatalities associated with benzimidazole opioid (nitazene analog) use: A systemic review. *Ther Drug Monit* 2022; 44: 494-510.

Our nurse certified specialists in poison information and physician toxicologists are available 24 hours a day to answer your questions.