

Potent synthetic opioids implicated in increase in drug overdoses

PHE Safety critical and complex National Patient Safety Alert.

PHE have today issued a safety critical and complex National Patient Safety Alert which requires action by HMPPS, Acute, mental health and community trusts, private and voluntary sector treatment services, ambulance and 999/111 service providers, general practice and community pharmacists.

Action

Please disseminate the attached alert to staff who may encounter people who use drugs, including:

- Prison Residential & Wing Staff
- Prison Healthcare
- Prison Security Departments
- Third sector / voluntary agencies working in prison
- Probation Approved Premises Managers & Staff
- Probation Contact Centre Managers & Staff
- Probation Unpaid Work Services

Recipients of the alert are encouraged to increase vigilance and follow the actions guided in the document, including alerting drug users to the heightened risk, and assuring accessibility of naloxone in settings where this is available.

Background

In the past 10-14 days there have been an unprecedented number of overdoses (with some deaths) in people who use drugs, primarily heroin, in some parts of the country.

Testing in two areas has so far found isotonitazene, a potent synthetic opioid. Isotonitazene has been identified previously in this country but its use has been more common in the USA. Its potency and toxicity are uncertain but perhaps similar to, or more than fentanyl, which is about 100x morphine.

There is good evidence from reports that naloxone, the 'antidote' to opioid overdoses, works in these cases.

Those in contact with heroin users should be alert to the increased possibility of overdose arising from 'heroin' containing synthetic opioids, be able to recognise possible symptoms of overdose and respond appropriately.

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