



**Health Alert:** *Patients at risk of benzodiazepine withdrawal due to disruption in access to medications in Atlantic County, NJ*

## **Background**

The New Jersey Department of Health (NJDOH) has been informed of an Atlantic County-based clinician prescribing controlled dangerous substances (CDS) who surrendered their Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) license, making this clinician unable to continue prescribing such medications. Patients receiving care from this provider were receiving prescriptions for medications including benzodiazepines and stimulants. This incident has led to a disruption in access to care and patient medical records for approximately 250-300 patients, leaving patients at-risk for withdrawal symptoms due to an abrupt discontinuation of benzodiazepines and more vulnerable to an overdose if they turn to the illicit drug supply. Abrupt withdrawal from benzodiazepines can be life-threatening.

This health alert is being issued to alert providers to the potential health concerns for impacted patients.

## **What are Benzodiazepines?**

Benzodiazepines are Schedule IV classified depressants that produce sedation and hypnosis, relieve anxiety and muscle spasms, and can also reduce seizures. Common brand-named benzodiazepines include Valium (diazepam), Xanax (alprazolam), Ativan (lorazepam), and Klonopin (clonazepam). Tolerance and dependency to benzodiazepines can develop with frequent use.

## **Benzodiazepine Withdrawal Health and Safety Risks**

Abrupt discontinuation of benzodiazepines can lead to withdrawal symptoms, which can be mild, severe, or life-threatening. Symptoms of benzodiazepine withdrawal include:

- Anxiety
- Tremors
- Irritability
- Insomnia
- Nausea/Vomiting
- Heart Palpitations
- Seizures
- Hallucinations
- Death

Onset of withdrawal symptoms associated with benzodiazepine discontinuation can vary based on the half-life of the medication prescribed and the dosage taken.

It is important to note that patients who lose access to their medications and are unable to access care may try to obtain benzodiazepines from an illicit source. With high rates of counterfeit pills containing fentanyl, these individuals are at an increased risk for overdose or death.



## **What are Stimulants?**

Stimulants are a class of substances that speed up the body's systems. This class of drugs includes prescription medications such as amphetamines (e.g., Adderall and Dexedrine), methylphenidate e.g., (Concerta® and Ritalin), diet aids such as Didrex, and other illicitly used drugs such as methamphetamine and cocaine.

## **Stimulant Safety Risks**

Stimulants can produce exhilaration, extended wakefulness, and loss of appetite. These effects are intensified when taken in large doses. Taking too large a dose at one time or over an extended period of time may cause side effects such as: dizziness, tremors, headache, flushed skin, chest pain with palpitations, excessive sweating, vomiting, and abdominal cramps.

## **Recommendations for Health Care Providers**

It is critical that patients who are prescribed CDS who lose access to their prescribing provider are re-connected to healthcare services as quickly as possible. Patients with a primary care provider should be encouraged to contact them immediately to discuss next steps in care. If the patient does not have a primary care provider, they should be encouraged to call the number on the back of their insurance card to receive help in finding an in-network provider to continue receiving care. Patients without health insurance coverage can be seen at a community health center by visiting [findahealthcenter.hrsa.gov](http://findahealthcenter.hrsa.gov).

Providers are also encouraged to:

- Counsel patients on the risks of abrupt discontinuation of benzodiazepines and withdrawal symptoms.
- Provide person-centered, non-judgmental, and trauma-informed care to patients.
- Educate patients about counterfeit pills in the illicit drug supply and the dangers of fentanyl. Remind patients that any pill that was not directly obtained from a pharmacy may contain fentanyl, which increases the risk of a fatal overdose. This includes pressed stimulant and benzodiazepine pills. Patients who are naïve to fentanyl (e.g., those obtaining controlled substances from a regulated source) are at an extremely high risk of overdose if exposed to fentanyl.
- Carry naloxone (Narcan) and encourage its use when a person's respiration is depressed, or if an opioid overdose is suspected.
- Provide information about harm reduction and safer use tips, including use of fentanyl test strips, trying a different route of administration, carrying naloxone, and going slow/using less with a new substance.
- Refer individuals to local harm reduction agencies or other trusted, community-based providers available to connect patients to needed resources (i.e., sterile syringes, overdose



education, HIV testing, fentanyl test strips, etc.). For more information on New Jersey's Harm Reduction Centers, visit <https://www.nj.gov/health/hivstdtb/hrc/>.

### **Where to get Naloxone (Narcan)**

- NJ residents can obtain naloxone freely and anonymously at participating pharmacies. Information and locations are available at <https://nj.gov/humanservices/stopoverdoses/>.
- In addition to local harm reduction centers, the New Jersey Harm Reduction Coalition mails naloxone kits confidentially and for free to anyone who needs them, regardless of insurance status. You can call or text 1-877-4NARCAN or visit [www.nextdistro.org/newjersey](http://www.nextdistro.org/newjersey).

### **Treatment and Support**

- ReachNJ is a 24-hour-a-day, 7 day-a-week hotline where people who have substance use disorder (SUD) or friends and family of people with SUD can get immediate assistance and support from live, New Jersey-based, trained addiction counselors. Call 1-844-ReachNJ (1- 844-732-2465).
- 988 is the nationwide 3-digit dialing code for Mental Health Crisis and Suicide Prevention. 988 will connect people to the existing National Suicide Prevention Lifeline. Compassionate, accessible care and support will be available for anyone experiencing mental health-related distress, thoughts of suicide, mental health or substance use crisis. People can also dial 988 if they are worried about a loved one who may need crisis support.

For more information, please contact Amanda Gan at the New Jersey Department of Health at [Amanda.Gan@doh.nj.gov](mailto:Amanda.Gan@doh.nj.gov).

*This resource provides an overview of options for patients who are prescribed a medication and have lost access to their health care provider. Some resources promoted below may not be applicable to all patients.*

## Where can I go for my health care?

If you have a primary care provider, contact them immediately to discuss next steps in care. If you do not have a primary care provider or if they are unable to provide the type of care you are seeking, find a provider by calling the number on the back of your health insurance card or check your insurer's website for in-network providers. If you do not have insurance, you may find a community health care provider at a health center near you. Visit [findahealthcenter.hrsa.gov](http://findahealthcenter.hrsa.gov). Please be aware, a new provider may recommend a new treatment plan.

## Where can I go for treatment and support?

**988** is the nationwide three-digit dialing code for mental health crisis and suicide prevention. Compassionate, accessible care and support is available for anyone experiencing mental health-related distress, thoughts of suicide, or a mental health crisis. **ReachNJ** is a 24/7 hotline where people who have substance use disorder (SUD) or friends and family of people with SUD can get immediate assistance and support from live, New Jersey-based, trained addiction counselors. **Call 1-844-ReachNJ (1- 844-732-2465).**

Some patients who lose access to their medications and are unable to access care may try to obtain medications from an illicit source.

**It is important to know that any pill that is not obtained directly from a pharmacy may contain fentanyl.**

Fentanyl is a powerful opioid, which can increase the risk of a fatal overdose. You can reduce your risk by carrying naloxone (the medication that reverses opioid overdoses) or by using fentanyl test strips.

## Where can I obtain naloxone (Narcan)?

NJ residents can obtain naloxone freely and anonymously at participating pharmacies. Information and locations are available at [nj.gov/humanservices/stopoverdoses](http://nj.gov/humanservices/stopoverdoses).

Additionally, the New Jersey Harm Reduction Coalition (NJHRC) mails naloxone kits and fentanyl test strips freely and anonymously to anyone in need, regardless of insurance status. **Text or call 1-877-4NARCAN** or visit [nextdistro.org/newjersey](http://nextdistro.org/newjersey).

**Benzodiazepines:** Benzodiazepines are medications that slow down your nervous system. These medications are often prescribed to relieve anxiety or to treat muscle spasms and seizures. Common brand-name benzodiazepines include Valium, Xanax, Ativan, and Klonopin. These medications can have risks, such as addiction, forgetfulness, and overdose.

Abruptly stopping use of benzodiazepines can lead to mild, severe, or even life-threatening withdrawal symptoms. Withdrawal symptoms include anxiety, tremors, irritability, insomnia, nausea/vomiting, heart palpitations, seizures, and hallucinations.

**If you are experiencing symptoms of withdrawal, seek immediate medical care by calling 911 or going to your local emergency department.** You may also call 1-844-ReachNJ to be connected to a treatment provider who can help manage withdrawal symptoms.

**Stimulants:** Stimulants are a class of substances that speed up the body's systems. This class of drugs includes prescription medications such as amphetamines (for example, Adderall), methylphenidate (for example, Concerta and Ritalin), diet aids, as well as other illicitly obtained substances such as methamphetamine and cocaine.

Stimulants can have risks, especially when taken in large doses, such as loss of appetite, chest pain, staying awake for too long, and addiction.

*Este recurso proporciona una descripción general de las opciones para los pacientes a quienes se les receta un medicamento y han perdido el acceso a su proveedor de atención médica. Es posible que algunos de los recursos que se promocionan a continuación no sean aplicables a todos los pacientes.*

## ¿A dónde puedo acudir para recibir

**atención médica?** Si usted tiene un proveedor de atención primaria, comuníquese con él de inmediato para analizar los próximos pasos en la atención. Si no tiene un proveedor de atención primaria o si este no puede brindarle el tipo de atención que busca, busque un proveedor llamando al número que aparece en el reverso de su tarjeta de seguro médico o consulte el sitio web de su aseguradora para conocer los proveedores dentro de la red. Si no tiene seguro, puede encontrar un proveedor de atención médica comunitario en un centro de salud cercano. Visite <https://findahealthcenter.hrsa.gov/>. Tenga en cuenta que un nuevo proveedor puede recomendar un nuevo plan de tratamiento.

## ¿Dónde puedo acudir para recibir

**tratamiento y apoyo?** **988** es el código de marcación nacional de 3 dígitos para crisis de salud mental y prevención del suicidio. La atención y el apoyo compasivos y accesibles están disponibles para cualquier persona que experimente angustia relacionada con la salud mental, pensamientos suicidas o una crisis de salud mental. **ReachNJ** es una línea directa disponible las 24 horas del día, los 7 días de la semana, donde las personas que tienen un trastorno por uso de sustancias (TUS) o amigos y familiares de personas con TUS pueden obtener asistencia y apoyo inmediatos de consejeros de adicciones capacitados en persona con sede en Nueva Jersey. **Llame al 1-844-ReachNJ (1- 844-732-2465).**

Algunos pacientes que pierden el acceso a sus medicamentos y no pueden acceder a la atención pueden tratar de obtener medicamentos de una fuente ilícita.

**Es importante saber que cualquier píldora que no se obtenga directamente de una farmacia puede contener fentanilo.**

El fentanilo es un opiáceo potente que puede aumentar el riesgo de una sobredosis mortal. Puede reducir su riesgo llevando naloxona (el medicamento que revierte las sobredosis de opiáceos) o usando tiras reactivas de fentanilo

## ¿Dónde puedo conseguir naloxona (también conocida como Narcán)?

Los residentes de Nueva Jersey pueden obtener naloxona de forma gratuita y anónima en las farmacias participantes. La información y las ubicaciones están disponibles en <https://nj.gov/humanservices/stopoverdoses/>. Además, la Coalición para la Reducción de Daños de Nueva Jersey (NJHRC) envía por correo kits de naloxona y tiras reactivas de fentanilo de forma gratuita y anónima a cualquier persona que los necesite, independientemente de su estado de seguro. Envíe un mensaje de texto o llame al **1-877-4NARCAN** o visite [www.nextdistro.org/newjersey](http://www.nextdistro.org/newjersey).

**Benzodiazepinas:** Las benzodiazepinas son medicamentos que disminuye el sistema nervioso. Estos medicamentos a menudo se recetan para aliviar la ansiedad o para tratar los espasmos musculares y las convulsiones. Las benzodiazepinas de marca comunes incluyen Valium, Xanax, Ativan y Klonopin. Estos medicamentos pueden tener riesgos, como adicción, olvido y sobredosis.

Suspender abruptamente el uso de benzodiazepinas puede provocar síntomas de abstinencia potencialmente mortales, como ansiedad, temblores, irritabilidad, insomnio, náuseas/vómitos, palpitaciones cardíacas, convulsiones y alucinaciones.

**Si experimenta síntomas de abstinencia, busque atención médica inmediata llamando al 911 o acudiendo al departamento de emergencias local.**

También puede llamar al 1-844-ReachNJ para que lo conecten con un proveedor de tratamiento que pueda ayudarlo a controlar los síntomas de abstinencia.

**Estimulantes:** Los estimulantes son una clase de sustancias que aceleran los sistemas del cuerpo. Esta clase de drogas incluye medicamentos recetados como anfetaminas (por ejemplo, Adderall), metilfenidato (por ejemplo, Concerta y Ritalin), ayudas para adelgazar, así como otras sustancias obtenidas ilícitamente como metanfetamina y cocaína.

Los estimulantes pueden tener riesgos, especialmente cuando se toman en grandes dosis, como pérdida de apetito, dolor en el pecho, permanecer despierto durante demasiado tiempo y adicción.