



Health Alert: *Patients at risk of benzodiazepine and opioid withdrawal due to disruption in access to medications in Wayne, NJ*
Updated June 17, 2024

Background

On June 13, 2024, The New Jersey Department of Health (NJDOH) was informed of a prescriber disruption involving a Wayne, New Jersey based clinician who prescribed controlled dangerous substances (CDS). The U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) has served the clinician with an immediate suspension order, making this clinician unable to continue prescribing CDS. Patients receiving care from this provider were receiving prescriptions for medications including benzodiazepines and opioids. This incident has led to a disruption in access to CDS for approximately 600-700 patients, leaving patients at-risk for withdrawal symptoms due to an abrupt discontinuation of these medications. Additionally, 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.

What are Opioids?



Opioids are medications prescribed by doctors to treat persistent or severe pain. They are often used by people with chronic headaches and backaches, by patients recovering from surgery or experiencing severe pain associated with cancer amongst other health ailments. While they are effective in relieving pain, there are risks with opioid use and they can be highly addictive. The risk of addiction is especially high when opioids are used to manage pain over an extended period of time.

Opioid Health and Safety Risks

Side effects of opioid use include fatigue, constipation and nausea. Opioids can also cause more serious side effects that can be life-threatening such as slowed or stopped breathing, slowed heart rate and loss of consciousness.

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.

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.

Providers are also encouraged to:

- Counsel patients on the risks of abrupt discontinuation of CDS and withdrawal symptoms, particularly for benzodiazepines as withdrawal for these medications can be life-threatening.
- 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 opioid 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.

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. For media inquiries, please visit the link below and complete the digital press intake form at <https://www.nj.gov/health/news/home/contact.shtml>.



Health Alert: Overdose Spike in Passaic County, New Jersey
Updated June 25, 2024

Summary: This alert is to notify partners of a higher than usual number of suspected overdoses in Passaic County, New Jersey (NJ) that occurred on the following dates based on several datasets: 5/27/2024, 6/11/2024, 6/12/2024, 6/18/2024, and 6/19/2024. The higher than usual overdose activity on these dates reflect **suspected opioid overdoses**.

What does this mean? This means that there were more suspected overdoses in Passaic County during this time period than the established overdose threshold, which for Passaic County is seven per day on average for emergency department (ED) data, and four per day for Emergency Medical Services (EMS) and Law Enforcement (LE) naloxone administration data. Please note that suspected overdoses may contain more than one type of substance (for example both cocaine and fentanyl), and so each suspected overdose (individual) may show up in these data more than once.

What can we do? Statewide and local resources serving people who use drugs and their family/friends in Passaic County include:

Naloxone:

NJ residents can obtain naloxone (also known as Narcan) freely and anonymously at participating pharmacies. Visit <https://nj.gov/humanservices/stopoverdoses/> for a list of pharmacies. Naloxone (also known as Narcan) Visit <https://nj.gov/humanservices/stopoverdoses/> for a list of pharmacies. Naloxone is a lifesaving medicine that can reverse an opioid overdose.

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 www.nextdistro.org/newjersey.

Mental Health Crisis:

988 is the nationwide 3-digit dialing code for Mental Health Crisis and Suicide Prevention. Compassionate, accessible care and support will be available for anyone experiencing mental health-related distress, thoughts of suicide, a mental health or substance use crisis.

Treatment and Recovery Services:

ReachNJ

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).



Harm Reduction Centers:



Harm Reduction Centers provide a safe, trauma-informed, non-stigmatizing space for people who use drugs to access safer use supplies such as sterile syringes, fentanyl/xylazine testing strips, naloxone, education on safer use/overdose prevention, care coordination, and safe disposal of used equipment, among other services. Scan the QR code to visit the New Jersey Department of Health website, which includes a list of all authorized harm reduction centers.

Harm Reduction Centers in Passaic County include:

Hyacinth AIDS Foundation

Mobile Site: Montgomery Street (between Straight Street and River Street), Paterson, NJ
(732) 447-3176

Black Lives Matter – Paterson

Fixed Site: 245 Broadway, Paterson, NJ 07505

Mobile sites located in the following cities in Passaic County: Paterson, Passaic, Clifton, Haledon, Hawthorne, Little Falls, Pompton Lakes, Prospect Park, Ringwood, Totowa, Wanaque, Wayne, West Milford, West Paterson/Woodland Park.

Call (732) 590-6066 for an updated schedule.

Chosen Generation Community Corporation aka Tier 1 Recovery (Fixed and mobile sites)

Fixed Site: 147 Montgomery Street
Paterson, NJ 07501

Mobile Site: Broadway, 4th Ward, Paterson, NJ
(973)782-6726

Passaic Prevention Coalition:

United for Prevention in Passaic County
300 Pompton Road
Wayne, NJ 07470
(973) 720-3146

Never Use Alone Hotline:

Toll-free national overdose prevention, detection, life-saving crisis response and medical intervention services for people who use drugs while alone. Never Use Alone's peer operators are available 24-hours a day, 7 days a week, 365 days a year.

English: 800-484-3731

Spanish: 800-928-5330



Who can I contact with questions? Please feel free to reach out to Amanda Gan, Public Health Analyst at Amanda.Gan@doh.nj.gov with any questions about this information or resources.

Thank you for your continued partnership as we work together to prevent unnecessary overdose deaths and related harm, and to keep all NJ residents healthy and well.

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

Where can I go for my healthcare? 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 healthcare provider at a health center near you. Visit 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 3-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 (a.k.a., Narcan)? NJ residents can obtain naloxone freely and anonymously at participating pharmacies. Information and locations are available at <https://nj.gov/humanservices/stopoverdoses/>.

Additionally, the New Jersey Harm Reduction Coalition 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 www.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 life-threatening withdrawal symptoms, including 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.

Opioids: Opioids are a class of substances that reduce pain. Opioids can be prescribed by doctors or obtained illicitly. While they are effective in relieving pain, there are risks of opioid use, such as addiction and overdose. Common opioids include morphine, oxycodone, fentanyl, and heroin.

There are effective medications that can be used to treat opioid use disorder and dependency, such as buprenorphine and methadone. Call 1-844-ReachNJ to be connected to a treatment provider who can provide these medications.

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 opioide potente que puede aumentar el riesgo de una sobredosis mortal. Puede reducir su riesgo llevando naloxona (el medicamento que revierte las sobredosis de opioides) 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.

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.

Opioides: Los opioides son una clase de sustancias que reducen el dolor. Los opioides pueden ser recetados por médicos u obtenidos ilícitamente. Si bien son eficaces para aliviar el dolor, existen riesgos del uso de opioides, como la adicción y la sobredosis. Los opioides comunes incluyen morfina, oxicodona, fentanilo y heroína. Existen medicamentos eficaces que se pueden usar para tratar el trastorno por consumo de opioides y la dependencia, como la buprenorfina y la metadona. Llame al 1-844-ReachNJ para que lo conecten con un proveedor de tratamiento que pueda proporcionar estos medicamentos.