



Health Alert: *Central New Jersey residents at risk of benzodiazepine and buprenorphine withdrawal due to a provider disruption in Bucks County, Pennsylvania*

Background

On June 25, 2024, The New Jersey Department of Health (NJDOH) was informed of a prescriber disruption involving a Bucks County, Pennsylvania-based clinician who prescribed controlled dangerous substances (CDS). At the time that a search warrant was executed, the physician surrendered their U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) license, making this clinician unable to continue prescribing CDS. Individuals seeing this provider were largely receiving prescriptions for buprenorphine, with a smaller number receiving benzodiazepine prescriptions. This incident has led to a disruption in access for approximately 60-90 individuals, including roughly 25-30 people from the Trenton, New Jersey area.

NJDOH has been informed that most patients receiving CDS prescriptions from this provider were re-selling or sharing their medications. Although this is a relatively small disruption, individuals who were obtaining these medications may be at an increased risk for withdrawal symptoms and overdose due to an abrupt discontinuation of the medication, and patients may seek a new supply in the illicit drug market, which is likely to be adulterated. Further, abrupt withdrawal from benzodiazepines can be life-threatening.

This health alert is being issued to inform local partners of the disruption and the potential concerns for those impacted.

What is Buprenorphine?

Buprenorphine is an opioid partial agonist used to treat opioid use disorder (OUD) that can be prescribed or dispensed in physician offices. Common brand names of buprenorphine include Subutex, Suboxone, Zubsolv, Bunavail, Probuphine, and Sublocade. Buprenorphine is a safe and effective medication used to treat OUD.

Buprenorphine Withdrawal Health and Safety Risks

Individuals who lose access to their medications and are unable to access care may try to obtain medications from an illicit source to prevent withdrawal symptoms and illness. **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.

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.

Recommendations for Central New Jersey Partners

Due to this disruption, individuals impacted from this case may try to obtain buprenorphine or benzodiazepines from a new or different supply. Education should be made widely available advising residents to never purchase medications from anywhere other than a legitimate pharmacy and to contact their primary care provider to discuss treatment options. In the event a person does not have a primary care provider, it should be encouraged that residents call the number on the back of their insurance card to receive help in finding an in-network provider to continue receiving care. Also, for those without health insurance coverage, information can be made available on how to find a community health center by visiting findahealthcenter.hrsa.gov.

The New Jersey Department of Health is encouraging partners to:

- Increase education and awareness about counterfeit pills in the illicit drug supply and the dangers of fentanyl. Emphasize in messaging 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. Those 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. Fentanyl test strips are an evidence-based tool to educate patients about the presence of fentanyl in a substance and can be used with pressed pills.
- Provide education about withdrawal symptoms (including life-threatening symptoms) associated with abrupt discontinuation of benzodiazepines. Counsel patients to seek immediate medical care (e.g., by calling 911 or going to the local emergency department) if they are experiencing symptoms of benzodiazepine withdrawal.
- Increase awareness around treatment and support for substance use disorder.
 - 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.
- Increase naloxone (aka Narcan) distribution and messaging and encourage its use when a person's respiration is depressed, or if an opioid overdose is suspected. There are many ways that individuals can obtain naloxone without charge, including:
 - 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.
- Provide information about harm reduction and safer use tips, including use of fentanyl/xylazine test strips, trying a different route of administration, carrying naloxone, and going slow/using less with a new substance.
- Promote the use of 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/>.

For more information, please contact Amanda Gan at the New Jersey Department of Health at Amanda.Gan@doh.nj.gov. Any providers in need of supplies (e.g., test strips, naloxone) may request them from NJ DOH.

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>.