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Counterfeit Pills from Illegal Pill Presses Fuel Overdose Deaths Nationwide

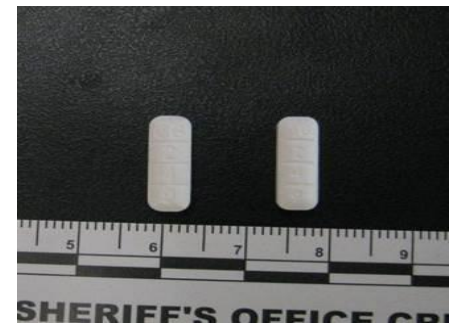
Clandestine pill press machines are sold domestically and around the globe on the streets and the dark web. Drug traffickers often use them to manufacture thousands of counterfeit pills within minutes. Counterfeit pills are dangerous because they may contain the wrong ingredients, too little, too much, or none of the active ingredient, or contain other, potentially life-threatening hidden ingredients, such as methamphetamine or illegally imported fentanyl which can be deadly even in tiny doses (DEA, 2021). Although one of these pills can be enough to kill, traffickers and dealers market them as medication on the illicit drug market.



Pill Press machines can cost from \$700 to \$8,000 depending on their level of sophistication. They are often shipped in pieces to avoid detection.

Pill presses fall within Florida's 2018 statute 893.147 specifying "use, possession, manufacture, delivery, transportation, advertisement, or retail sale of drug paraphernalia." Since the passing of this statute in 2018, there have been five cases involving pill press seizures covered by the media in Palm Beach, Martin, Seminole, and Okaloosa Counties. Moreover, a May 2021 report from the Partnership for Safe Medicines and the National Association of Drug Diversion Investigators (NADDI) of counterfeit pills and pill presses found that between January 2016 and February 2021 there were 92 incidents in 37 states (including Florida) in which law enforcement seized at least one pill press.

Data from the Broward Sheriff's Office (BSO) crime laboratory indicate that of the samples identified in April of 2021, the majority (47%; n=16) contained a synthetic cathinone such as eutylone. These stimulants have hallucinogenic properties and are linked to adverse cardiac effects. In May of 2021, most (40%; n=8) of the 20 samples contained illegally imported fentanyl. Although not all substances in these reports come from counterfeit pills, this information illustrates that these deadly chemicals are present in our local drug supply, increasing the likelihood they will be found in counterfeit pills in Broward County.



Counterfeit Alprazolam tablets containing etizolam. Tablets have also been found to contain synthetic cathinones and illegally imported fentanyl.

The recent legal and regulatory progress related to pill presses in Florida seems to have had little impact. According to Lisa McElhane, COO of NADDI and former BSO employee, "The swelling epidemic of drug trafficking makes a mockery of the current law(s). . . better prevention tools—including those that would control illicit pill presses—are necessary to address the surge. We need to focus on border controls, information sharing, and nationwide oversight to curb the appeal of dealing and using."

Sources: DEA issues warning over counterfeit pills. From <https://www.dea.gov/press-releases/2021/05/21/dea-issues-warning-over-counterfeit-pills>; 2021 update Illegal pill presses: An overlooked threat to American patients. From: <https://www.safemedicines.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/2021-Update-PillPress-Report-SECURE-2.pdf>

Broward Briefings may be copied. Please cite United Way of Broward County Commission on Behavioral Health & Drug Prevention.