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Drug Alert: “Gas Station Heroin”

In recent months, media reports and data from the National Drug Early Warning System have indicated growing interest in, and use of, tianeptine in the U.S. This drug is an antidepressant which is not approved in the U.S. for any medical use but is used in some Latin American, European, and Asian countries to treat depression. Even though it is an antidepressant, tianeptine is in a class of drugs called “opioid receptor agonists,” which means that in the brain tianeptine activates the opioid receptors in the same way that heroin, oxycodone, morphine, and other



Photo source: <https://www.vice.com/en/article/88q3va/tianeptine-gas-station-heroin-legal-in-most-states>

opioids would. At high doses, tianeptine can produce euphoria reminiscent of opioids. Because of this, tianeptine presents risks to users, including dependence or addiction, as well as withdrawal symptoms.

Under federal substance use policies, tianeptine is not a controlled substance and therefore can be sold as a dietary supplement or research chemical. As a result, tianeptine is commonly referred to as “gas station heroin” because in many locations it is legally available for purchase or even online. Common brand names include TD Red, Tianna, and ZaZa Red. It is often referred to by these names or as “red” or “Pegasus.”

Recent warnings from the U.S. Food and Drug Administration note that people may be turning to tianeptine in order to avoid using opioids and some may be using to self-treat mental distress or symptoms of anxiety or depression. As a result, calls to poison centers related to tianeptine have been increasing. The FDA also notes that individuals who misuse or abuse tianeptine experience serious negative consequences, including agitation, drowsiness, confusion, sweating, rapid heartbeat, high blood pressure, nausea, vomiting, respiratory depression, coma, and death. The FDA is urging all consumers to avoid tianeptine but especially individuals with opioid use disorder, as it can disrupt recovery and increase risk of overdose and death.

Sources: FDA, <https://www.fda.gov/consumers/consumer-updates/tianeptine-products-linked-serious-harm-overdoses-death> and <https://www.fda.gov/food/dietary-supplement-products-ingredients/tianeptine-dietary-supplements>; DEA, https://www.deadiversion.usdoj.gov/drug_chem_info/tianeptine.pdf

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