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Increasing Concern about Xylazine Use in the U.S.

Xylazine is a veterinary drug used as a sedative and muscle relaxant for large animals. Although xylazine is not approved for use in humans, human consumption may produce respiratory depression, slowed heart rate, and hypotension. This can be especially dangerous when xylazine is used as an adulterant in illicitly manufactured opioids (i.e., fentanyl and fentanyl analogs) because it increases the risk for fatal overdose. Moreover, xylazine is not an opioid and therefore does not respond to naloxone. When combined with opioids, xylazine may make naloxone less effective in reversing an opioid overdose.

Limited reports of xylazine being present in drug overdose deaths have occurred since the mid-2000s, yet recent data indicate that xylazine use is growing. Although data are limited, some of the most comprehensive information comes

from a study of 10 jurisdictions across the U.S. (Figure 1). Using local medical examiner and coroner records to examine overdose mortality, researchers found prevalence of xylazine was highest in jurisdictions in the northeast: Philadelphia (26%), Maryland (19%), and Connecticut (10%). Of overdose deaths involving xylazine, illicitly manufactured fentanyl and fentanyl analogs were present in 98%, followed by cocaine (45%), benzodiazepines (28%), heroin (23%), and alcohol (20%). Researchers also conducted qualitative interviews with people who inject drugs. They found that xylazine is a desired opioid adulterant because it can lengthen the duration of the central nervous system effects of fentanyl.

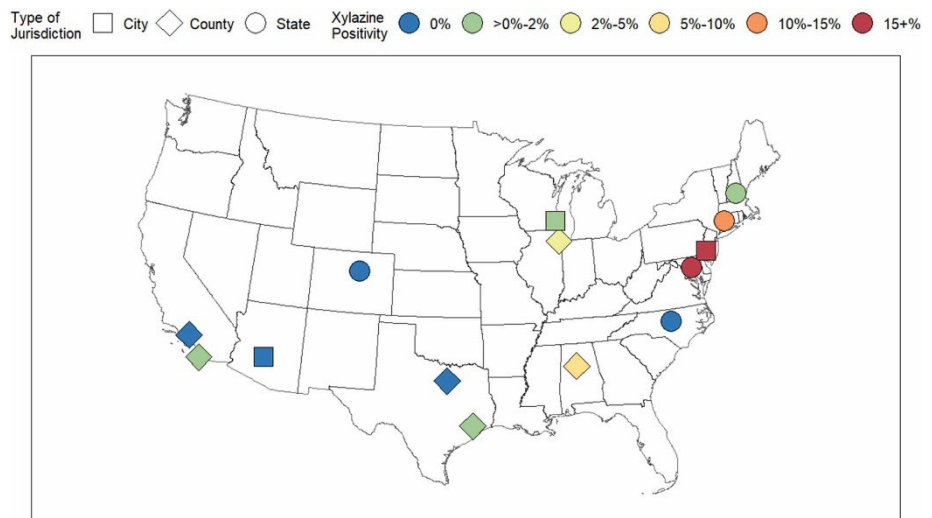


Figure 1: Xylazine-Present Overdose Deaths (Friedman et al., 2022)

Local surveillance data related to xylazine are scant. However, the recent Florida Medical Examiners Commission report noted 112 deaths involving xylazine in the state between January and June 2021.

Sources: Friedman, J., et al. (2022). Xylazine spreads across the US: A growing component of the increasingly synthetic and polysubstance overdose crisis. *Drug and alcohol dependence*, 233, 109380; Kariisa, M., et al. (2021). Notes from the Field: Xylazine Detection and Involvement in Drug Overdose Deaths—United States, 2019. *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report*, 70(37), 1300; Florida Medical Examiners Commission, <https://www.fdle.state.fl.us/MEC/Publications-and-Forms>.

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