



Canadian Community
Epidemiology Network
on Drug Use



Canadian Centre
on Substance Use
and Addiction

Substance Use Trends

FIRST ISSUE!

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Counterfeit Pharmaceuticals

The [Canadian Community Epidemiology Network on Drug Use \(CCENDU\)](#), co-ordinated by the [Canadian Centre on Substance Use and Addiction \(CCSA\)](#), publishes this newsletter monthly to inform people living in Canada about emerging substance use issues and trends, pulling from a variety of information sources.

Counterfeit pharmaceuticals are tablets or pills manufactured in clandestine labs but made to look like commercially available medications. They have been part of the unregulated drug supply for years but have become more common recently. Authentic pills are difficult to distinguish from good fakes, but some counterfeit pills will not contain the expected ingredients. The most common are counterfeit opioid and benzodiazepine pharmaceuticals that contain more potent ingredients than the commercial versions.

Common counterfeit pharmaceuticals and what they are supposed to contain:

- Dilaudid®: hydromorphone
- OxyContin®, Supeudol®, generic tablets stamped with M 30, A 215, APO OCD 80: oxycodone
- Percocet®: oxycodone and acetaminophen
- Xanax®: alprazolam
- Adderall®: amphetamine

This development has raised increasing concerns about unintentional exposure to high-potency opioids and benzodiazepines, which poses a significant risk of potentially fatal toxicity to people with low tolerance to these substances, including people turning to the unregulated drug supply for the first time. This phenomenon also complicates our understanding of the diversion of medically prescribed alternatives to the unregulated supply, as the relative availability of genuine and counterfeit pharmaceuticals on the unregulated market is unknown.

The following sections describe the detection of and responses to the appearance of counterfeit pharmaceuticals across Canada.



Reports from CCENDU Sites

CCENDU is a pan-Canadian network of community partners with sites in British Columbia, Alberta, Manitoba, Thunder Bay, Toronto, Quebec, Nova Scotia, and Newfoundland and Labrador. Each site collects information from their local partners and networks about substance-related trends and response options.



01 — British Columbia: B.C. Centre for Disease Control

Regional health authorities have reported counterfeit Dilaudid, Percocet and oxycodone containing nitazenes, fentanyl, fentanyl analogues, and benzodiazepines, alone or in combination. In 2024, several seizures of these counterfeit pills were made in British Columbia. Responses include issuing alerts, drug checking and providing guidance on identifying counterfeit drugs. Planning should prepare for a potential decline in hydromorphone prescriptions and a rise in counterfeit versions, a trend previously seen with oxycodone.

02 — Alberta

There have been reports of counterfeit Xanax bars containing non-medical benzodiazepines (e.g., bromazolam and flualprazolam). There have been reports to a lesser extent of counterfeit oxycodone tablets (sold as OxyContin, generic Percocet “TEC” pills and Supeudol) containing fentanyl and fentanyl analogues. Fake Supeudol 20 mg tablets containing para-fluorofentanyl and bromazolam were linked to a fatal drug toxicity event in February 2024. Nitazenes have been identified in pills seized by law enforcement that resemble generic Percocet tablets and are engraved with “TEC” on one side and a horizontal line on the other



side. Responses such as drug checking services and alerts from other jurisdictions are helpful in identifying and mitigating these risks.

03 — Thunder Bay

Pill presses are being used to produce counterfeit medications, frequently Percocet. Pills often contain fentanyl, benzodiazepines and veterinary drugs. There have been reports of drug poisonings, especially among people who do not regularly use fentanyl from the unregulated supply and lack tolerance.

04 — Quebec: Institut national de santé publique du Québec

In recent years, counterfeit tablets, generally sold as Dilaudid or oxycodone, have been reported to contain nitazenes (e.g., protonitazene, metonitazene and protonitazepyne) or benzodiazepines. Some regions have reported associated overdoses. Responses include harm reduction messaging and disseminating alerts to the public and partners.

05 — Nova Scotia: Nova Scotia Health Authority

Over the past year, networks have identified counterfeit Percocet that has tested positive for fentanyl and been linked to drug poisoning emergencies. No testing has identified nitazenes. Greater awareness of exposure to fentanyl through counterfeit pharmaceuticals is needed as many people do not intend to use fentanyl. Responses include harm reduction messaging, including advice against using alone, making naloxone available, recommending drug checking and calling 911 in case of emergency.

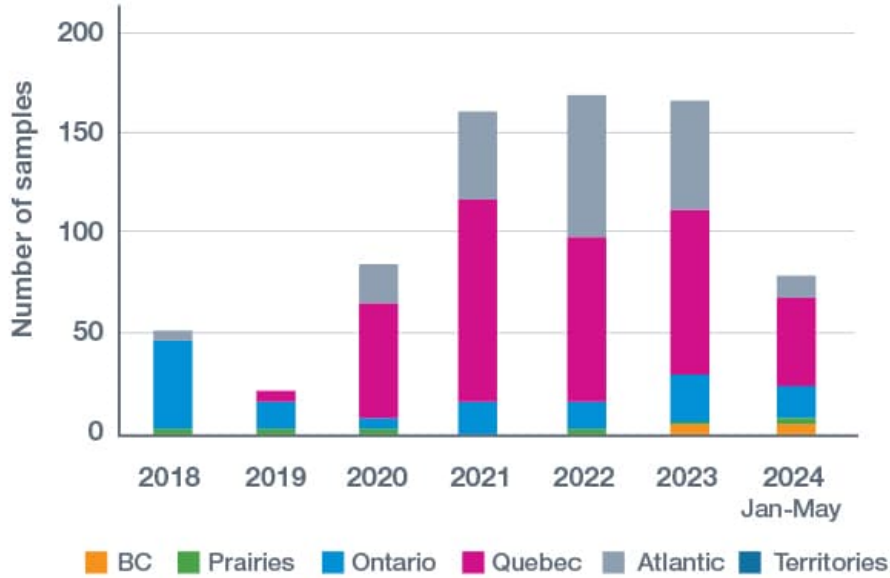
Detection in Seized Drugs

The prevalence of substances in the unregulated drug supply can be estimated [from Health Canada's Drug Analysis Service \(DAS\)](#), which analyzes the content of substances seized and submitted by law enforcement agencies.

DAS defines a “counterfeit” as a sample that resembles a pharmaceutical product but does not contain the expected substances. The following information was submitted by DAS about hydromorphone, oxycodone and alprazolam counterfeit samples submitted to their laboratories from January 1, 2018, to May 31, 2024.

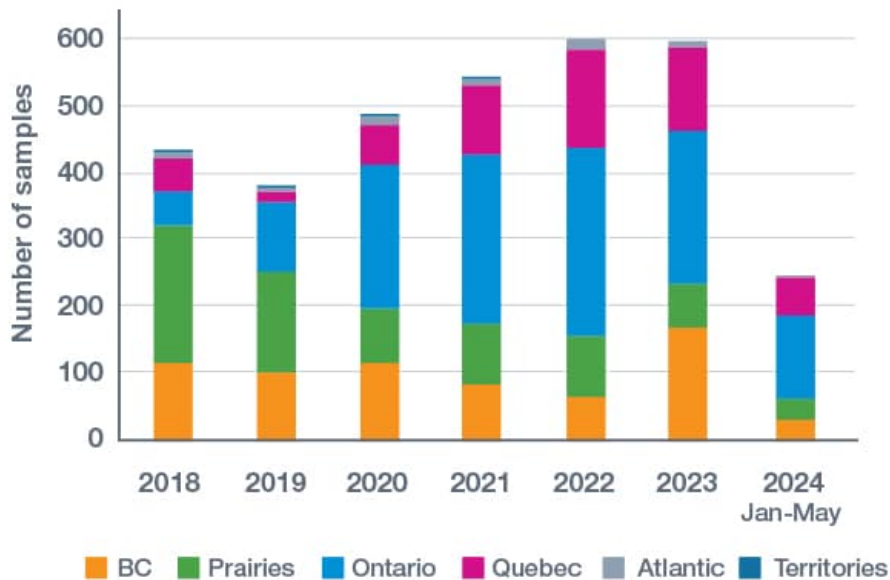


Number of Suspected Counterfeit Hydromorphone Samples Submitted, by Region



Top three substances identified in suspected hydromorphone counterfeit samples: protonitazene (50% of all samples), isotonitazene (19%) and metonitazene (5%).

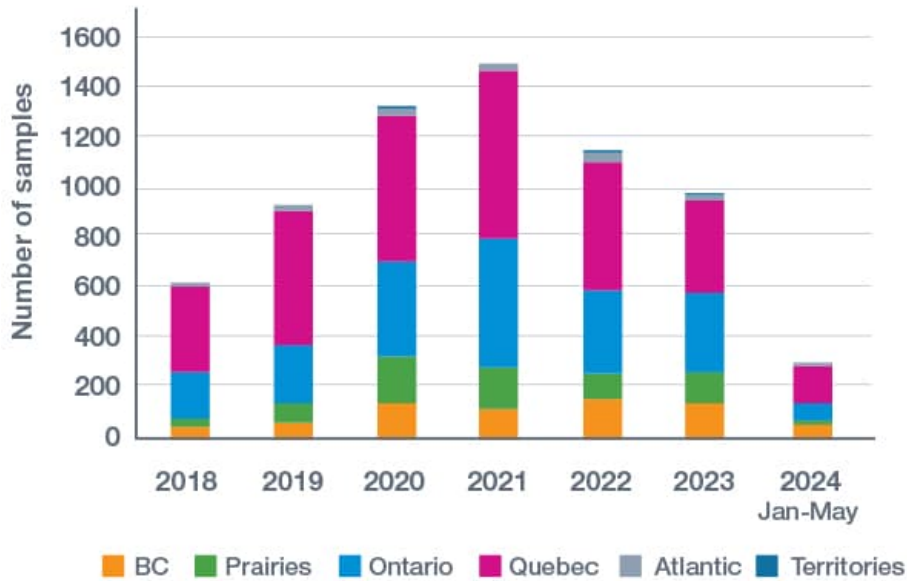
Number of Suspected Counterfeit Oxycodone Samples Submitted, by Region





Top three substances identified in suspected oxycodone counterfeit samples: fentanyl (45%), caffeine (26%) and protonitazene (13%).

Number of Suspected Counterfeit Alprazolam Samples Submitted, by Region



Top three substances identified in suspected alprazolam counterfeit samples: etizolam (29%), flubromazolam (27%) and flualprazolam (22%).

The results suggest that counterfeit alprazolam pills are more common than counterfeit opioids (i.e., hydromorphone and oxycodone), but their prevalence is decreasing while that of counterfeit opioids is on the rise. Counterfeit alprazolam pills typically contain non-medical benzodiazepines, while counterfeit opioids tend to contain fentanyl, fentanyl analogues and nitazenes. Although counterfeit hydromorphone is not as prevalent as the others, it might be particularly dangerous due to adulteration with nitazenes, which can be much more potent than hydromorphone or even fentanyl.

Note: DAS cannot confirm that samples submitted for analysis are counterfeit as DAS does not specialize in counterfeit analysis. Law enforcement agencies submit samples without any seizure information, so DAS does not know the origin of the samples. DAS results featured in this newsletter may differ from other data presented by DAS due to differences in how the data were analyzed and displayed. For additional information about the work of DAS, please visit their [website](#).



Reports from Drug Checking Services

The Canadian [National Drug Checking Working Group \(NDCWG\)](#), co-ordinated by CCSA, is a pan-Canadian community of practice of drug checking service providers and their local, provincial, territorial and federal partners. The NDCWG has representatives from 45 drug checking services in Yukon, British Columbia, Alberta, Saskatchewan, Manitoba, Ontario, Quebec and Prince Edward Island.



01 — Toronto’s Drug Checking Service

Between October 2019 and April 2024, 306 samples expected to be pharmaceutical opioids (i.e., Percocet, OxyContin, Dilaudid, hydrocodone or oxycodone) were checked. Among those, 45 (15%) unexpectedly contained a high-potency opioid (i.e., fentanyl, fluorofentanyl, isotonitazene or protonitazene, metonitazene, etonitazepine, isotonitazepine or protonitazepine and N-desethyl etonitazene, alone or in combination). Both the frequency of detecting nitazene opioids and their strength have increased in 2024.

02 — B.C. Centre on Substance Use (BCCSU) Drug Checking Program

Between January 2023 and April 2024, 781 samples expected to be pharmaceutical opioids (i.e., Dilaudid, Oxycodone or Percocet) were checked by the BCCSU. Among those, 183 (23%) contained no active ingredients and 206 (26%) contained unexpected ingredients, including 145 (19%) that contained fentanyl, fentanyl analogues, benzodiazepines, protonitazene, metonitazene or xylazine, alone or in combination. Fentanyl was the most common unexpected ingredient, with benzodiazepine detection, often concurrent with fentanyl, increasing in 2024. The number of pharmaceutical opioids brought in for drug checking has increased in 2024 as awareness of counterfeits has grown.



Note: BCCSU Drug Checking collates information from over 40 cities across British Columbia and includes results reported by the Fraser Health Authority.

03 — Fraser Health Authority, B.C.

Counterfeit Percocet containing fentanyl analogues and benzodiazepines, Dilaudid containing fentanyl analogues (beginning in 2024), Adderall containing methamphetamine and Xanax containing different kinds of benzodiazepines and fentanyl have been detected. Xanax bars are almost always counterfeit. Most service users are aware of counterfeit pharmaceuticals, although people who do not access drug checking services are often not.

04 — Blood Ties Four Directions Centre, Yukon

Among counterfeit pharmaceuticals, the most common were Percocet containing no active ingredients (often microcrystalline cellulose) and Xanax bars of which 90% contain unspecified benzodiazepines. Overall, counterfeit pharmaceuticals are rare, with only 14 detections in 2023 and one by June 3, 2024. Counterfeits are not a significant concern among service users, who mostly use street “down” (i.e., opioids).

05 — Spectre de rue, Montreal

Since April 2023, counterfeit opioid pharmaceuticals (i.e., Dilaudid and pills stamped with M30, A215 (“Tonies”) and APO 80/OCD 80 sold as oxycodone) containing nitazenes have been detected, alongside a counterfeit Xanax bar containing bromazolam. One sample has been linked to a drug poisoning. However, some service users report intentionally seeking nitazenes and using drug checking to know which nitazenes are present and their concentration.

06 — L’Anonyme, Montreal

Counterfeit opioid pharmaceuticals (i.e., Dilaudid and oxycodone) were detected in December 2023 and January 2024 only. They contained N-pyrrolidino protonitazene or butonitazene. However, submission of pharmaceuticals for testing is rare at this site.

To learn more about these services, visit [the Toronto's Drug Checking Service](#), [DrugSense \(BCCSU\)](#), [Blood Ties Four Directions Centre](#), [Spectre de rue](#) and [L’Anonyme](#) websites.

Mentions in the Media

Media mentions are collated by CCSA via manual online searches for news releases and stories, and by CCSA’s social reporting platform, which uses artificial intelligence to identify relevant posts on substances or drug trends on social media.

From January 2023 to May 2024, 26 tweets and articles on counterfeit pharmaceuticals were captured. Most media mentions were from British Columbia and Ontario.



Hydromorphone

1. [B.C. Counterfeit drugs containing opioids found in Vancouver: VCH alert](#)
2. [B.C. How do B.C. police determine if seized drugs come from safe supply?](#)
3. [B.C. Tweet: VANDU Drug Alert](#)
4. [B.C. Tweet: White counterfeit hydromorphone/Dilaudid tablets...](#)
5. [B.C. Tweet: Drug advisory for a substance sold as Dilaudid/ Hydromorphone/ Dillies...](#)
6. [B.C. Tweet: DRUG ADVISORY for fake Dilaudid...](#)
7. [Que. Montreal public health warns of counterfeit hydromorphone pills after fatal overdose – CityNews Montreal](#)
8. [Que. Instagram post: La #SantéPubliqueMTL est préoccupée par la circulation importante de comprimés contrefaits](#)
9. [N.B. Saint John police arrest three, seize drugs and guns following 10-week drug trafficking investigation](#)
10. [N.B. Police seize \\$160,000 in drugs, two guns](#)
11. [N.B. Woman admits selling fentanyl; prison looms](#)

Alprazolam (Xanax)

1. [B.C. 8 arrested in BC for running criminal network of Drugs, weapons and Gang-related Murder planning](#)
2. [Ont. Drug charges laid following 2023 overdose death of Thorold man](#)

Oxycodone

1. [B.C. Tweet: Yellow pressed pill with imprint “40” resembling oxycodone...](#)
2. [Alta. Naloxone-resistant street drug linked to 9 deaths in Eastern Canada seized in Alberta](#)
3. [Ont. Hamilton officials warn of opioid drug being posed as oxycontin](#)
4. [Ont. Tweet: We believe that counterfeit oxycodone tablets may be in circulation...](#)
5. [Ont. Tweet: WARNING: Fake OxyContin Alert](#)
6. [Ont. Tweet... increase in the presence of nitazene opioids...](#)
7. [Que. New opioid 25 times more powerful than fentanyl circulating in Quebec: public health](#)
8. [Que. Montreal boy, 15, killed by drug more potent than fentanyl](#)

Other

1. [B.C. Tweet: This sample contains a significant amount of protonitazene...](#)
2. [Alta. Fort McMurray man faces 25 charges after ALERT seizes drugs, firearms and cash](#)
3. [Alta. ALERT charges 10 in connection with Medicine Hat drug trafficking investigation](#)
4. [Ont. Tweet... identified two “new” high potency synthetic nitazene opioids...](#)
5. [Que. Instagram post: Seriez-vous capable de reconnaître un faux comprimé?](#)

Last search date: social media: June 3, 2024; Media scan: May 30, 2024



Resources

For more information on this topic, see these resources developed by our partners:

- [Nitazene opioids in Toronto opioid samples that are not expected to contain high-potency opioids \(Toronto's Drug Checking Service\)](#)
- [Bulletin: Counterfeit Hydromorphone Tablets \(towardtheheart.com\)](#)
- [Oxycodone de rue \(CIUSSS de la Capitale-Nationale\)](#)
- [Contamination - comprimés d'hydromorphone \(CIUSSS de la Capitale-Nationale\)](#)
- [Risque de SURDOSE dû à des comprimés contenant de l'isotonitazène \(toni\) et du protonitazène \(CIUSSS de la Capitale-Nationale\)](#)
- [Nitazenes \(CCENDU Drug Alert\)](#)
- [Risks and Harms Associated with the Nonmedical Use of Benzodiazepines in the Unregulated Drug Supply in Canada \(CCENDU Bulletin\)](#)

Prepared by the CCSA in partnership with the Canadian Community Epidemiology Network on Drug Use (CCENDU)

The Canadian Community Epidemiology Network on Drug Use (CCENDU) is a nation-wide network of community level partners who share information about local trends and emerging issues in substance use and exchange knowledge and tools to support more effective data collection.

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