

Notification: Flualprazolam found in fake 'Xanax' tablet

Alert ID: N20/0011

12 October 2020

This notification is to advise of the detection of Flualprazolam in yellow counterfeit Xanax pills being sold across New Zealand. Flualprazolam is a dangerous and potent novel benzodiazepine with a relatively short on-set of action and heavy sedative effects.

Counterfeit benzodiazepines such as these illicitly produced 'Xanax' are a relatively new trend in New Zealand. They have been listed for sale on social media, and on NZ-based dark-web sites.

High Alert strongly urges people not to take rectangle shaped/2 mg 'Xanax' tablets in New Zealand. They are not approved nor legitimately available in this form and are almost certain to be counterfeit.

Detection:

A sample of these counterfeit Xanax tablets was handed in to our partner KnowYourStuff, and later forensic analysis by the Institute of Environmental Science and Research (ESR) indicated the presence of flualprazolam.

This is the first time flualprazolam has been detected in New Zealand. While the ESR don't have a certified reference standard to confirm its presence, the analytical findings are consistent with those from international testing results.

Recognising the drug:

These counterfeit pills appear as a yellow, rectangular 'Xanax' with R039 printed on one side, with three break lines delineating four sections. They have been sold as alprazolam under the slang name 'bars' or 'school buses' for between \$25 and \$50.

These tablets are designed to imitate 2mg Pfizer produced, alprazolam containing Xanax brand tablets. 2 mg rectangular 'Xanax' brand tablets are not legitimately dispensed in NZ.



Figure 1 Yellow 'Xanax' bar - Actual photos of sample

The effects of flualprazolam are similar to other benzodiazepines, and include:

- sedation and sleepiness;
- feelings of relaxation;
- slurred speech;

- loss of consciousness.

Harm:

Counterfeit fake Xanax pills are a growing trend in United Kingdom and the United States. In 2019 the Centre for Forensic Science Research and Education identified flualprazolam as a contributing factor in over 40 deaths in the United Statesⁱ. It is now the second most commonly detected novel benzodiazepine in the U.S. 12 deaths have been attributed to flualprazolam in the United Kingdom.

Flualprazolam has not been approved for use medically and therefore limited pharmacological information is available. No studies of animal or human abuse potential have been published. However, flualprazolam is known to be 50x more potent by weight than alprazolam, with the common dose being less than 0.5mg. The dose-response curve of flualprazolam is particularly steep, meaning a dose over 2mg can easily be fatal.

Counterfeit Xanax pills that have been illicitly manufactured often have unpredictable dosages, resulting in unintended overdosing. Many pills internationally have been shown to have varying doses even within the same batch.

On 14 August [High Alert posted a notification](#) warning of an increase in counterfeit Xanax tablets which contained Etizolam, a drug that was attributed to 548 deaths in 2018. These appear very similar and are also made to look like 'Xanax' tablets.

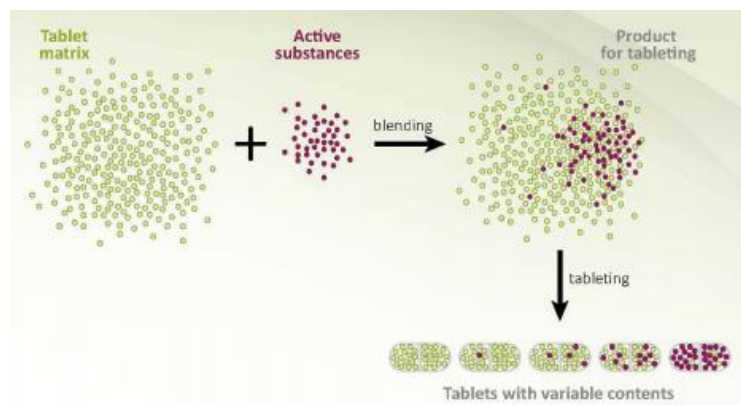


Figure 2 Variable dose of active substance in clandestinely manufactured pillsⁱⁱ

Harm reduction:

High Alert strongly urges people not to take rectangle shaped/2 mg 'Xanax' tablets in New Zealand. They are not approved nor legitimately available in this form and are almost certain to be counterfeit.

No drug use is the safest drug use. Like other benzodiazepines, flualprazolam has potential for substance use disorder including craving, tolerance and withdrawal symptoms. Flualprazolam is not responsive to the opioid reversing agent naloxone. Flualprazolam is very potent and variation potential for dosing increases the risk.

As with other benzodiazepines, flualprazolam is a strong central nervous system (CNS) depressant. When combined with other CNS depressants, such as alcohol and opioids, it can be fatal even at low doses.

Always call an ambulance if someone:

- is unconscious;
- stops breathing;
- has a seizure;
- is extremely agitated for longer than 15 minutes;
- has chest pain or breathing difficulties for longer than 5 minutes.

If you have heard of any reports of this drug please get in contact with us. We will provide further updates as more information becomes available.

ⁱ United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime. (December 2019). *United States: Increasing health concerns about the benzodiazepine flualprazolam*. Retrieved 29 September 2020 from

<https://www.unodc.org/LSS/Announcement/Details/1ec17cfc-b5bf-4643-93d5-ae9c10dcceeb>

ⁱⁱ United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime. (March 2017). *Fentanyl and its analogues – 50 years on*. UNODC.