


Project supported by the PHA


Understanding the **Misuse** of Prescribed and Over-the-Counter Drugs






Housekeeping

- Breaks
- Microphones
- Internet connections
- Confidentiality
- Questions/comments







Course Objectives

By the end of today, you will be able to:

- Understand the prevalence of prescription (Rx) and over-the-counter (OTC) medicine misuse in Northern Ireland
- Identify medicines most commonly misused, how they're misused, their indications of use, and their effects
- Understand how Rx and OTC medicine misuse can lead to dependence







Course Objectives

By the end of today, you will be able to:


- Understand risks and harms for the user associated with the misuse
- Identify key harm reduction strategies
- Identify local substance misuse services



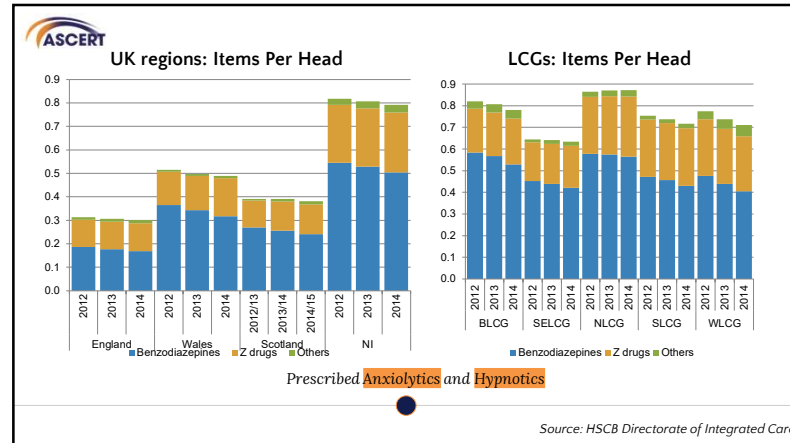
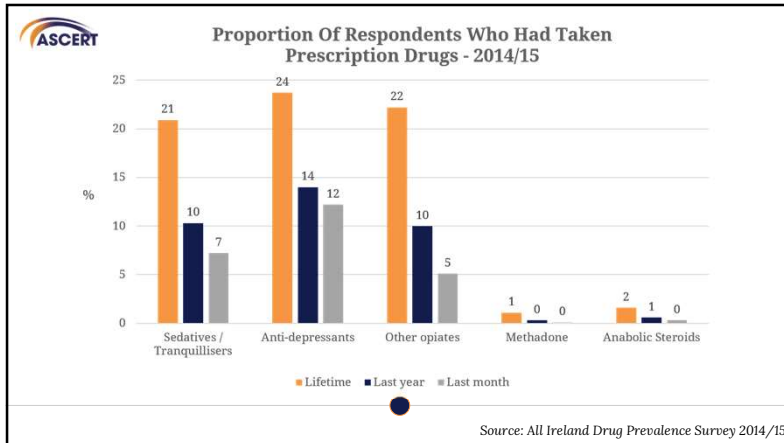


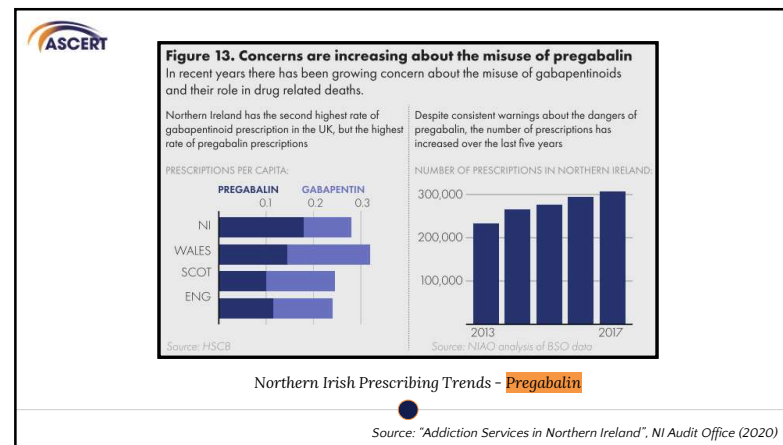
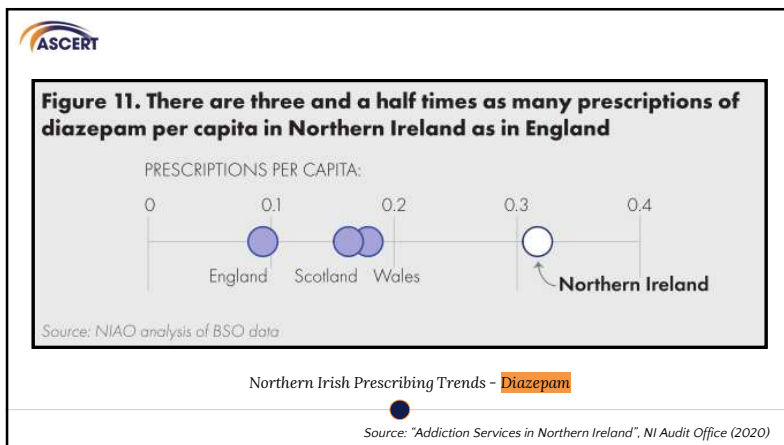
1 Introduction

What is the prevalence of prescription and over-the-counter medicine use/misuse?



QUIZ



Pregabalin, diazepam, & tramadol are the most commonly requested medications

Sedative/tranquiliser use is more common in the most deprived areas
- it's over 2x as prevalent than the least deprived areas

1/5 of respondents had ever taken tranquilisers

Females and older respondents were more likely to have used sedatives, anti-depressants, and other opiates

Source: All Ireland Drug Prevalence Survey 2014/15

14.6% (more than 1 in 10) of clients presenting to services indicated they took at least one prescription drug

Benzodiazepines are the third most commonly used drugs in clients presenting to substance misuse services (31.4% of clients) and third most commonly used by clients in all Trust areas

Pregabalin (Lyrica) is the fourth most commonly used drug in clients presenting to substance misuse services (21.8% of clients) and fifth most commonly used by clients in 4/5 Trust areas

3/5 of the most commonly used drugs in HM Prison clients are prescription drugs

Source: Substance Misuse Database 2019/20

| ASCERT | 2013 | 2014 | 2015 | 2016 | 2017 | 2018 | 2019 | 2020 | 2021 | Total (2013-2021) |
|---|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|-------------------|
| All benzodiazepines* | 47 | 45 | 63 | 67 | 61 | 97 | 102 | 100 | 111 | 692 |
| All antidepressants | 27 | 30 | 38 | 39 | 25 | 42 | 39 | 46 | 27 | 344 |
| Tramadol* ³ | 20 | 22 | 28 | 33 | 31 | 27 | 33 | 26 | 22 | 242 |
| Heroin/Morphine* | 25 | 11 | 11 | 27 | 24 | 40 | 46 | 55 | 39 | 292 |
| Codeine not from compound formulation* | 22 | 20 | 13 | 17 | 16 | 13 | 33 | 25 | 16 | 177 |
| Pregabalin | 1 | 5 | 7 | 9 | 33 | 54 | 77 | 70 | 71 | 327 |
| Dihydrocodeine not from compound formulation* | 6 | 8 | 13 | 18 | 8 | 11 | 12 | 3 | 16 | 95 |
| Cocaine* | 1 | 8 | 8 | 3 | 13 | 28 | 37 | 36 | 33 | 167 |
| All amphetamines* | 1 | 9 | 7 | 8 | 6 | 15 | 11 | 12 | 7 | 78 |
| MDMA/Ecstasy* | 1 | 7 | 4 | 7 | 5 | 11 | 11 | 10 | 5 | 62 |
| Methadone* | 5 | 8 | 6 | 8 | 6 | 15 | 16 | 13 | 19 | 96 |
| Paracetamol | 8 | 3 | 2 | 1 | 2 | 10 | 6 | 5 | 6 | 43 |
| New Psychoactive Substances | 4 | 19 | 15 | 6 | 12 | 10 | 11 | 51 | 73 | 207 |

Deaths by Drug Type

Source: NISRA (2022)

| ASCERT | | | | | | | | | | Total (2013-2021) |
|-----------------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|-------------------|
| Number of drugs | 2013 | 2014 | 2015 | 2016 | 2017 | 2018 | 2019 | 2020 | 2021 | |
| One | 45 | 30 | 43 | 25 | 40 | 50 | 42 | 56 | 54 | 384 |
| Two | 27 | 28 | 39 | 36 | 26 | 40 | 31 | 45 | 36 | 314 |
| Three | 21 | 21 | 25 | 22 | 28 | 38 | 29 | 34 | 46 | 264 |
| Four | 8 | 8 | 19 | 22 | 15 | 23 | 35 | 28 | 30 | 188 |
| Five or more | 5 | 14 | 11 | 17 | 19 | 32 | 43 | 37 | 33 | 211 |
| Unknown | 9 | 9 | 7 | 5 | 8 | 6 | 11 | 18 | 14 | 87 |
| | 115 | 110 | 144 | 127 | 136 | 189 | 191 | 218 | 213 | 1448 |

Deaths by Number of Drugs Mentioned on the Death Certificate

Source: NISRA (2022)

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2 What is Medicine Misuse?

What does it mean to misuse prescribed and OTC medication, and what are the signs of misuse?

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Medicine misuse refers to the use of a medication for a purpose that is not in agreement with legal or medical guidelines.

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Medicine Misuse

- Medicine misuse includes:
 - Taking medication where there is no recognised medical need
 - Taking prescription medication that hasn't been prescribed to you
 - Excessive dosing
 - Use via an unintended route of administration



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Common Reasons for Misuse



- The drug isn't adequately treating symptoms
- To address another medical condition
- As a coping mechanism (e.g. bereavement)
- To become intoxicated from the effects of the drug

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Common Reasons for Misuse




- Lack of patient education/knowledge of the drug and its effects
- To prevent withdrawal symptoms of that or another drug
- To enhance the effects of another drug
- As a substitute for an illicit drug of choice if unavailable

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Potential Signs of Misuse


- Taking higher doses than prescribed or running out early
- "Losing" medication
- Seeking prescriptions from multiple sources
- Requesting specific drugs
- Attempting to buy unusual amounts



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Potential Signs of Misuse


- People travelling together buying the same item at different times
- Stealing, forging, or diverting prescriptions
- Using the medications of family/friends
- Combining medicines with other substances



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Potential Signs of Misuse

- Appearing intoxicated, sedated, or experiencing withdrawal
- Excessive mood swings/hostility
- Increase or decrease in sleep
- Evidence of cravings or other signs of dependence



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3 Commonly Misused Medicines

What are some of the most commonly misused Rx and OTC medications?

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What are some commonly misused prescribed or OTC medications?

In groups, do some research on a commonly misused Rx or OTC medication, then share your information with the larger group.



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Commonly Misused Over-the-Counter Drugs

| | | |
|---|--|--|
| <p>Sedative Antihistamines</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Depressant ○ Used to treat allergies, colds, travel sickness, and sleeping difficulties ○ Diphenhydramine (Nytol) | <p>Decongestants</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Stimulant ○ Used for respiratory infections (cold) ○ Pseudoephedrine (Sudafed, Contac) | <p>Laxatives</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Used to treat constipation/digestive difficulty ○ Most commonly misused by the elderly and those with eating disorders ○ Senokot |
|---|--|--|

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Commonly Misused Over-the-Counter Drugs

| | | |
|--|---|---|
| <p>Cold Medicines</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Depressants and dissociatives ○ Diphenhydramine (Nytol) ○ Dextromethorphan (Benlyn Dry Cough) ○ Promethazine (Night Nurse) | <p>Codeine-Based Medicines</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Depressants/opioids ○ Used for pain relief ○ Co-codamol ○ Solpadeine ○ Nurofen Plus | <p>Paracetamol</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Used for pain relief ○ Usually unintentional excessive intake through lack of education on paracetamol-containing products ○ Calpol, Lemsip |
|--|---|---|

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Commonly Misused Prescription Drugs

| | |
|--|---|
| <p>Stimulants</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Used to treat attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) and some sleep disorders (e.g. narcolepsy) ○ Methylphenidate (Ritalin); lisdexamfetamine (Elvanse) | <p>Anticonvulsants/ Mood Stabilisers</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Depressants ○ Used to treat epileptic seizures, some mental health conditions (e.g. bipolar disorder), and neuropathic pain ○ Gabapentin ○ Pregabalin (Lyrica) |
|--|---|

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Commonly Misused Prescription Drugs

| | |
|---|--|
| <p>Opioids</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Depressants ○ Used to treat pain ○ Codeine/dihydrocodeine ○ Fentanyl ○ Buprenorphine ○ Tramadol ○ Oxycodone | <p>Sedatives/Hypnotics/ Anxiolytics</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Depressants ○ Used to treat conditions like anxiety and sleep disorders ○ Benzodiazepines (e.g. diazepam) ○ Z-drugs (e.g. zolpidem) ○ Pregabalin (Lyrica) |
|---|--|

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4 Harms and Risks Associated with Prescription and OTC Medicine Misuse

What are some of the harms/risks associated with Rx and OTC medicine misuse?

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📍 Fake Medications and Buying Online

- More than 1 in 7 (15%) of UK adults have admitted to purchasing prescription medications without a prescription
- Most common fake drugs seized in NI: benzodiazepines, Z drugs, and pregabalin/gabapentin
- 62% of prescription products bought online are fake, substandard, or unapproved
 - Sites selling to the UK public must be registered with MHRA



Sources: European Alliance for Access to Safe Medicines; Medicines and Healthcare Products Regulatory Agency

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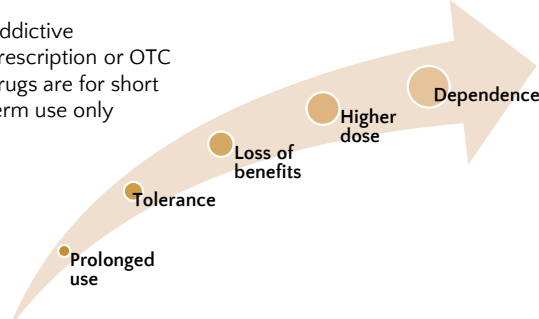
📍 Polydrug Use

| | | |
|--|---|--|
| <p>Mixing depressants</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Magnifies overall effect → increased risk of overdose Greater depression of breathing and heart rate Particular risk with mixing opioids, benzos, and alcohol | <p>Mixing stimulants</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Magnifies overall effect → increased risk of overdose Increased risk of stroke, seizures, or heart failure | <p>Mixing stimulants & depressants</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Effects of the stimulant could be masked → taking more to feel the effects Increased risk of stroke, seizures, or heart failure |
|--|---|--|

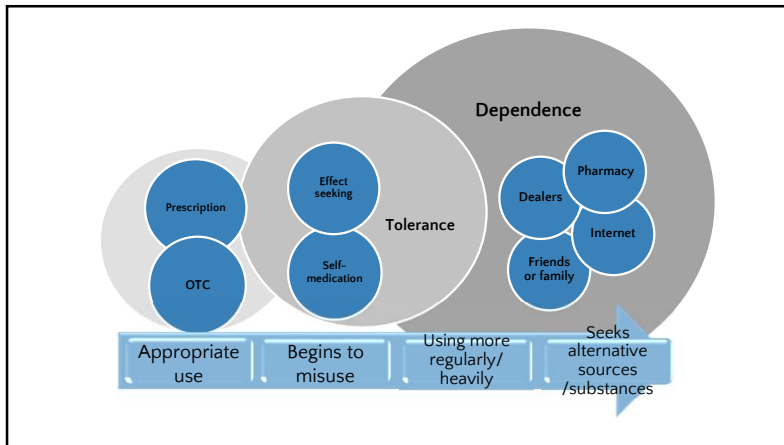
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📍 Pathway to Dependence

Addictive prescription or OTC drugs are for short term use only



Prolonged use → Tolerance → Loss of benefits → Higher dose → Dependence



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Opioids: **Tolerance** and **Overdose**

Mike Davis and TED-Ed, <https://youtu.be/VOCdS128-q4>

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Opioid Overdose

- Non-fatal overdoses are several times more common than fatal opioid overdoses
- Opioid overdoses can be identified by a combination of three signs and symptoms (“opioid overdose triad”)
 - Pinpoint pupils
 - Unconsciousness
 - Respiratory depression

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Risk Factors for Overdose

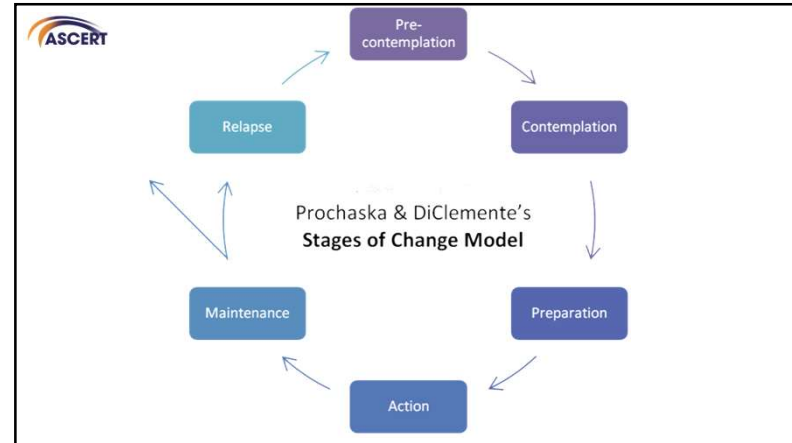
- Mixing drugs
- Quality of the drug(s)
- Tolerance
- Environment
- Age and physical health
- Mode of administration
- History of overdose

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Harm Reduction and Treatment for Rx and OTC Medicine Misuse

5

What are common pieces of harm reduction advice given for Rx/OTC medicine misuse, and what does treatment look like?



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Harm reduction can be defined as a range of strategies and interventions designed to reduce the harm caused by drug use.

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The Rationale Behind Harm Reduction

Chicago Recovery Alliance and SAMHSA; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b4ubYWpmX9c>

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Harm Reduction Advice




- “Menu of options” is best → allows person to choose what’s right/feasible for them
- Advice can focus on
 - Reducing harm associated with the drug itself/its route of administration
 - Safety and wellbeing on a more general basis

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Harm Reduction – All Substances

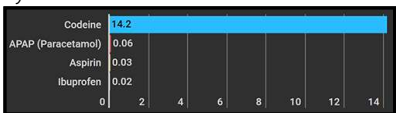
- Tolerance and overdose
 - Tolerance decreases after breaks → increased risk of overdose
- Routes of administration
 - Oral is best
 - Snorting can be harmful → injury
 - Injection can be particularly dangerous
 - Bloodborne viruses, cutaneous injury/infection, gel capsules
 - If switching to smoking/injection, refer to specialist services



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Harm Reduction – Opioids

- Cold water extraction with codeine containing products (dependent users)
 - Meant to remove paracetamol or ibuprofen from compounds
- Avoiding constipation
- Tramadol overdose and withdrawal risks
 - Seizures
 - Serotonin syndrome




| Substance | Relative Toxicity |
|--------------------|-------------------|
| Codeine | 14.2 |
| APAP (Paracetamol) | 0.06 |
| Aspirin | 0.03 |
| Ibuprofen | 0.02 |

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Harm Reduction – Benzodiazepines


- Dosing/overdose
 - Mixing with alcohol → significantly decreased inhibitions
- Switching to other benzos
 - Method used by GPs to help taper down dosages for those who are dependent
 - Different drugs that are longer acting or come in smaller doses



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Harm Reduction - Benzodiazepines

- Situational risks
 - What they do while using
 - Where they're using
 - With whom they're using
- Comedown after binging
 - Some have experienced suicidal thoughts/behaviours
 - Encourage healthy behaviours/routines
- Awareness of fake pills - WEDINOS



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W025986

Date Received: 13 May 2022
 Posicode: BT1 -
 Purchase Intent: Clonazepam
 Package Label: Clonazepam
 Sample Colour: Yellow
 Sample Form: Tablet
 Consumption Method: Not Stated
 Self-Reported Effects: Not Stated
 Sample Upon Analysis (Major): Fluorazepam
 Sample Upon Analysis (Minor):



[Click to Enlarge](#)

W024537

Date Received: 07 Mar 2022
 Posicode: BT35 -
 Purchase Intent: Diazepam
 Package Label: MSJ
 Sample Colour: Blue
 Sample Form: Tablet
 Consumption Method: Not Stated
 Self-Reported Effects: Released, Confusion
 Sample Upon Analysis (Major): No Active Component Identified
 Sample Upon Analysis (Minor):



[Click to Enlarge](#)

W027746

Date Received: 28 Sep 2022
 Posicode: BT67 -
 Purchase Intent: Diazepam
 Package Label: B White
 Sample Colour: White
 Sample Form: Tablet
 Consumption Method: Not Stated
 Self-Reported Effects: Not Stated
 Sample Upon Analysis (Major): Etizolam
 Sample Upon Analysis (Minor):



[Click to Enlarge](#)

W031094

Date Received: 18 Feb 2023
 Posicode: BT20 -
 Purchase Intent: Xanax
 Package Label: Not Stated
 Sample Colour: Green
 Sample Form: Tablet
 Consumption Method: Oral
 Self-Reported Effects: Released, Breathlessness, Irregular Heartbeat, Nausea, Paranoia, Depression
 Sample Upon Analysis (Major): Bromazepam
 Sample Upon Analysis (Minor):



[Click to Enlarge](#)

W028165


Date Received: 07 Sep 2022
 Posicode: BT26 -
 Purchase Intent: Temazepam
 Package Label: Temazepam Teva
 Sample Colour: White
 Sample Form: Tablet
 Consumption Method: Not Stated
 Self-Reported Effects: Not Stated
 Sample Upon Analysis (Major): Bromazepam
 Sample Upon Analysis (Minor): Fluorazepam



[Click to Enlarge](#)

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Harm Reduction - Antihistamines




- Similar harm reduction advice to benzos
- Tolerance can develop quickly
- Overdosing is possible
- Routes of administration
 - Can be snorted but doesn't offer more compared to ingestion (similar effect/shorter duration)
 - Can be injected but can be harmful - refer to specialist services
- Potentiating other drugs (opioids)

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Harm Reduction - Stimulants

- Dosing and comedown
 - Less is more - what does up must come down
 - Higher, faster, longer → lower, deeper, longer
- Using with Selective Serotonin Reuptake Inhibitors (SSRIs) can cause serotonin syndrome
 - Nausea/vomiting, muscle jerking, confusion, agitation
 - Possibly fatal



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Harm Reduction - Gabapentinoids



- Effects similar to benzos and alcohol – similar harm reduction advice
- Route of administration
 - Oral is best
 - Capsule contents not meant to be injected, could damage veins – refer to specialist services
 - If snorting, follow usual harm reduction advice


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Harm Reduction - Gabapentinoids



- Dosage
 - Active in the body at least 12 hours – don't redose unless very tolerant (wait 2+ hours)
 - Don't use more than 600 mg in 24 hours
- Withdrawal
 - Get support from a specialist service
 - Average decrease by 50mg/week
- Avoid when pregnant

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Harm Reduction in **Action**: Pregabalin


"Drugs Map of Britain: Belfast's Pregabalin Addiction", BBC Three; <https://youtu.be/8fc8sXWopBs>

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Treatment

- Needs to be tailored to the individual and medically directed
 - Tapering the drug dosage to manage withdrawal
 - Substitution of more appropriate/less addictive medication (e.g. OST)
 - Evidence-based talking therapies (e.g. CBT)
 - Support to improve self-management of symptoms (e.g. Pain Toolkit)





6 Signposting
Who's available to help?



NIDACTS

Northern Ireland Drug and Alcohol Coordination Teams


drugsandalcoholni.info




Family Support NI

familysupportni.gov.uk

A directory of various support services (e.g. mental health, finances) and registered childcare services in NI

Thanks!

Any questions?

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