

Neenah Dorn
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Xylazine's Impact on the Community

With recent overdoses across America, an animal tranquilizer, xylazine, has been detected in illicit drugs and overdose deaths.

According to Dr. Tasha Turner-Bicknell, DNP, public health nursing online programs director, and professor at the University of Cincinnati, xylazine is “a sedative, tranquilizer, anesthetic, and muscle relaxer used by veterinarians to aid surgical procedures.” It is not an opioid, but can affect blood pressure, breathing, heart rate, and body temperature to harmful levels.

Since the drug is not an opioid, it is hard to reverse overdoses with naloxone and can lead to first responders performing CPR. “The survival rate is pretty low because of the challenges with reversing these two drugs, but there are times if first responders or anyone who is CPR certified can get to them in time, the result may be different,” Turner-Bicknell said.

Xylazine is difficult to find in the body because the substance is made for animals and not humans. “It is hard to detect the number of overdoses correlated with xylazine,” Turner Bicknell said. Xylazine was something people in the community never thought of.

There are several side effects that come from this drug that include, including severe skin wounds and patches of dead tissue that are easily infected. If the wounds are left untreated, they may later lead to amputation. The wounds can spread to other parts of the body from the injection site and can lead to death. “It is important for people with these wounds to get treatment because, without medical care, it can lead to more serious health problems and can even be fatal,” said Turner-Bicknell.

The process for test strips for xylazine has not been approved for mass distribution. The aid for the wounds to avoid infections and more serious outcomes is a huge start to this journey. Lawmakers are still in the process of analyzing xylazine as a narcotic.

There are safe injection sites available for people who use drugs to have health care and education. “We give people this opportunity to have an outlet and get help, but we are nowhere near our goal of having more resources for people who are in need,” Turner-Bicknell said.

Dr. TB, a nickname her colleagues and students call her, has a huge passion for several harm reduction efforts including, increasing the implementation of harm reduction vending machines and providing safer smoker kits for people with addictions. “I simply want to make the world a better place for not just me and you but for everyone who may go through these things; why

shouldn't they have the same equal opportunities and help they may need like us," said Tucker Bucknell.