

Hospitals and Behavioral Health Providers are Reporting Severe and Worsening Presentations of Withdrawal among People who Use Drugs (PWUD) in Philadelphia

DATE:	December 18, 2024
TO:	Health Alert Network
FROM:	Debra L. Bogen, M.D., FAAP, Secretary of Health
SUBJECT:	Hospitals and Behavioral Health Providers are Reporting Severe and Worsening Presentations of Withdrawal among People who Use Drugs (PWUD) in Philadelphia
DISTRIBUTION:	Statewide
LOCATION:	N/A
STREET ADDRESS:	N/A
COUNTY:	N/A
MUNICIPALITY:	N/A
ZIP CODE:	N/A

This transmission is a “Health Advisory” which provides important information for a specific incident or situation; may not require immediate action.

HOSPITALS: PLEASE SHARE WITH ALL MEDICAL, PEDIATRIC, NURSING AND LABORATORY STAFF IN YOUR HOSPITAL; EMS COUNCILS: PLEASE DISTRIBUTE AS APPROPRIATE; FQHCs: PLEASE DISTRIBUTE AS APPROPRIATE LOCAL HEALTH JURISDICTIONS: PLEASE DISTRIBUTE AS APPROPRIATE; PROFESSIONAL ORGANIZATIONS: PLEASE DISTRIBUTE TO YOUR MEMBERSHIP; LONG-TERM CARE FACILITIES: PLEASE SHARE WITH ALL MEDICAL, INFECTION CONTROL, AND NURSING STAFF IN YOUR FACILITY

Summary

The Philadelphia Department of Public Health received reports of severe and worsening presentations of withdrawal among PWUD:

- Symptoms of worsening and severe withdrawal include: intractable vomiting, excessive diaphoresis, hypertensive emergency, waxing and waning hypoactive encephalopathy, tremor, and tachycardia.
- Worsening and severe presentations of withdrawal are likely due to changes in illicit fentanyl and the increasing prevalence of medetomidine in illicit fentanyl.
- Although opioid withdrawal is often safely managed in outpatient, residential, and non-hospital treatment settings, adulterants such as medetomidine may necessitate higher levels of care for intoxication and withdrawal management. The treatment strategies listed here may require hospital or ICU level monitoring and support.
- Treatment strategies include aggressive management of opioid withdrawal with methadone and hydromorphone and alpha-2- agonist withdrawal with clonidine.
- PWUD with these symptoms may be at risk of aspiration, and non-oral treatment modalities can be used to reduce risk of aspiration.
- For questions, please call DOH at 1-877-PA-HEALTH (877- 724-3258) or your Poison Control Center at (800) 222-1222.

The Pennsylvania Department of Health (DOH) is forwarding the following advisory from the Philadelphia Department of Public Health (PDPH) to health care providers: [Hospitals and behavioral health providers are reporting severe and worsening presentations of withdrawal among people who use drugs \(PWUD\) in Philadelphia](#)

While PA DOH is not aware of similar reports outside of Philadelphia, there have been [reports of medetomidine](#) in the drug supply in other counties and in Maryland. Fentanyl is also prevalent throughout the Commonwealth. Therefore, PWUD in other areas of the Commonwealth may experience severe and worsening presentations of withdrawal.

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Individuals interested in receiving future PA-HANs can register at:
<https://ondemand.mir3.com/han-pa-gov/login/>.

Categories of Health Alert messages:

Health Alert: conveys the highest level of importance; warrants immediate action or attention.

Health Advisory: provides important information for a specific incident or situation; may not require immediate action.

Health Update: provides updated information regarding an incident or situation; unlikely to require immediate action.

This information is current as of December 18, 2024 but may be modified in the future. We will continue to post updated information regarding the most common questions about this subject.