

Nitazenes



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What are they, where are they, and
how should we respond?

8th July 2024

Agenda

- 1. Background** Adam Holland (FPH Drugs SIG)
- 2. Detections in substances** Dean Acreman (WEDINOS)
- 3. Detections post-mortem** Caroline Copeland (NPSUM)
- 4. Contingency planning** Jody Clark (Office of the West Mids PCC)
- 5. Final thoughts / questions** Adam Holland (FPH Drugs SIG)
- 6. Questions**

What are they?

They are a *class of synthetic opioids* increasingly being detected as *adulterants*

Class – a group of drugs sharing a similar structure

Synthetic – made in a laboratory from chemicals

Opioids – they bind with opioid receptors

Adulterants – contaminants in substances sold as other drugs

Common misconceptions

They are not....

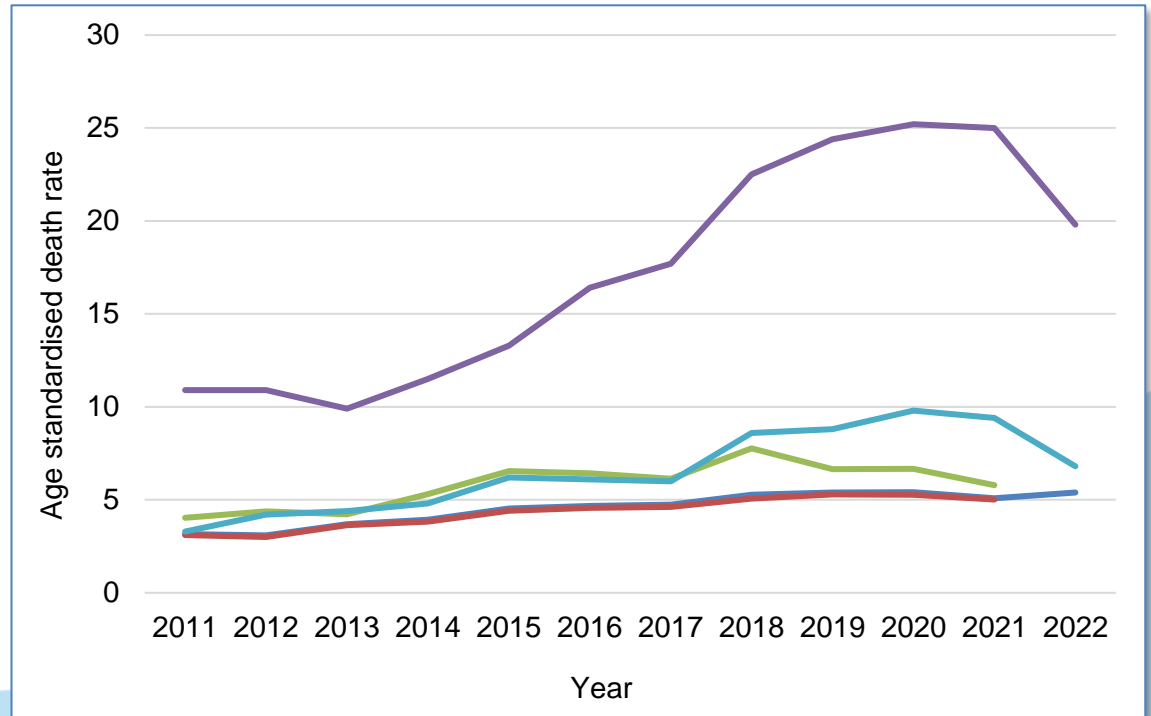
- **Opiates** (all opiates are opioids, but not all opioids are opiates)
- **One drug** (they are a *class* of drugs)
- **Fentanyl**s (these are different synthetic opioids)

We already have a drug-related death crisis



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Drug-related death rates in the UK



Why are we concerned?

Risk of overdose

| Substance | Relative potency |
|---------------|------------------|
| Heroin | 1 |
| Fentanyl | 50 |
| Metonitazene | 50 |
| Protonitazene | 100 |
| Isotonitazene | 250 |
| Etonitazene | 500 |



(Holland et al., 2024)

(Sutherland, 2016)

Why are we concerned?

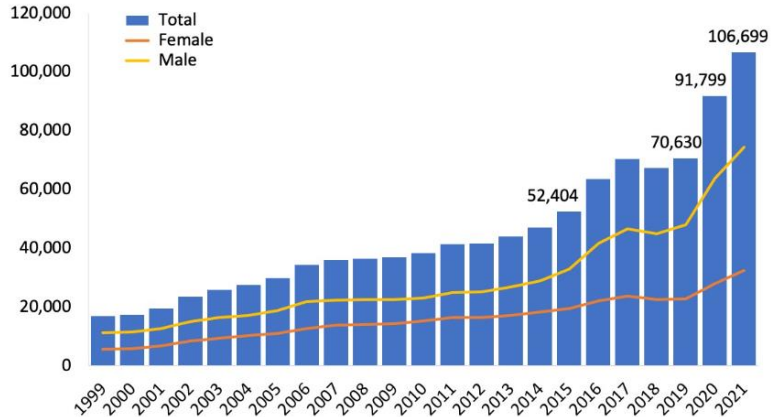
Adulteration increasing risks

- Nitazenes not just being detected in substances sold as other opioids.
- Higher risk of overdose for people with no opioid tolerance.

Why are we concerned?

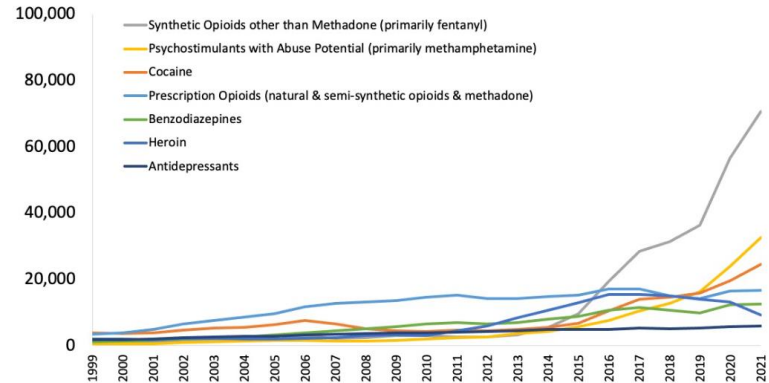
International context

Figure 1. National Drug-Involved Overdose Deaths*, Number Among All Ages, by Gender, 1999-2021



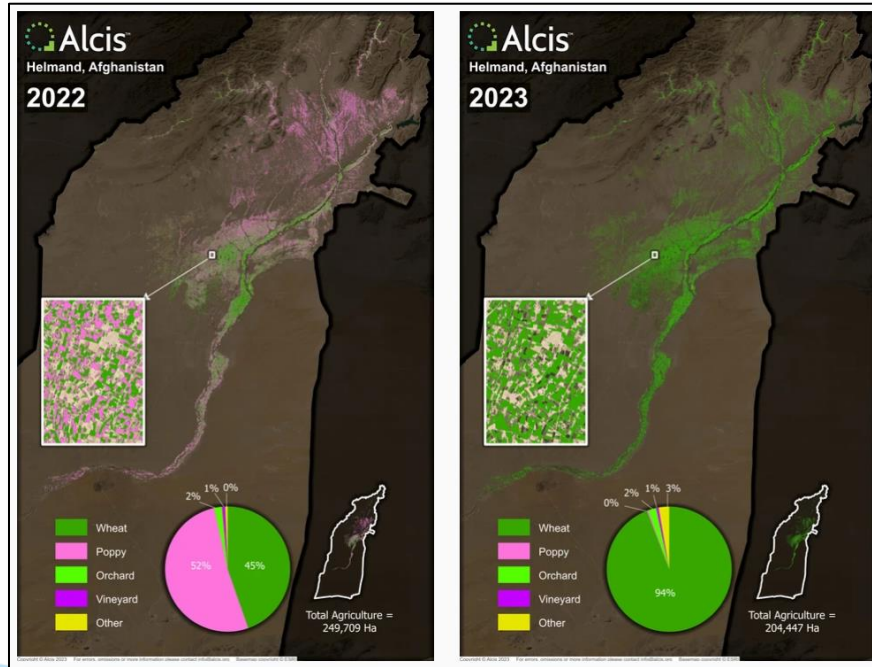
*Includes deaths with underlying causes of unintentional drug poisoning (X40-X44), suicide drug poisoning (X60-X64), homicide drug poisoning (X85), or drug poisoning of undetermined intent (Y10-Y14), as coded in the International Classification of Diseases, 10th Revision. Source: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, National Center for Health Statistics. Multiple Cause of Death 1999-2021 on CDC WONDER Online Database, released 1/2023.

Figure 2. National Drug-Involved Overdose Deaths*, Number Among All Ages, 1999-2021



*Includes deaths with underlying causes of unintentional drug poisoning (X40-X44), suicide drug poisoning (X60-X64), homicide drug poisoning (X85), or drug poisoning of undetermined intent (Y10-Y14), as coded in the International Classification of Diseases, 10th Revision. Source: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, National Center for Health Statistics. Multiple Cause of Death 1999-2021 on CDC WONDER Online Database, released 1/2023.

Why is this happening?



- Possibly (*probably?*) associated with Taliban poppy cultivation ban.
- Afghanistan main source of heroin in Europe.
- Poppy cultivation reduced by 86% between 2023 and 2024.
- Several possible futures....

Why is this happening?

Inevitability in context of international drug policy?

Synthetics and innovations in illegal drug manufacturing and trafficking challenge justice responses

- a. Illegal drug markets are transforming rapidly and, in some regions, radically, with **synthetic drugs** becoming increasingly dominant. Synthetic drug manufacture is cheap, easy and fast. As synthetic drugs are not tied to geographically fixed crops, using instead a wide array of precursors, supply can be relocated closer to consumer markets, and seized products can be quickly replaced, defeating drug law enforcement efforts:

(UNODC, 2023)

>860 'novel / new' psychoactive substances (they're sometimes not very new) notified to the EMCDDA from 1997 – Dec 2021

(EMCDDA, 2024).

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Key questions

- How to adapt drug testing protocols in drugs services?
- How to increase desirability of OST?
- How to provide support to people who use benzodiazepines?
- How to facilitate supervision of drug use?
- How to make drug checking / postal drug testing more widely available?
- How to adapt UK drugs policy to facilitate effective measures?

Final thoughts

- Things are going to get worse before they get better.
- We need emergency response *and* to plan for a potential ‘new normal’.
- Many of the changes we need to address nitazenes would be beneficial to reduce harms for people who use other drugs.

Questions



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