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# PA GROUNDHOGS



## PUBLIC HEALTH ALERT

### Benzo Dope in Western PA

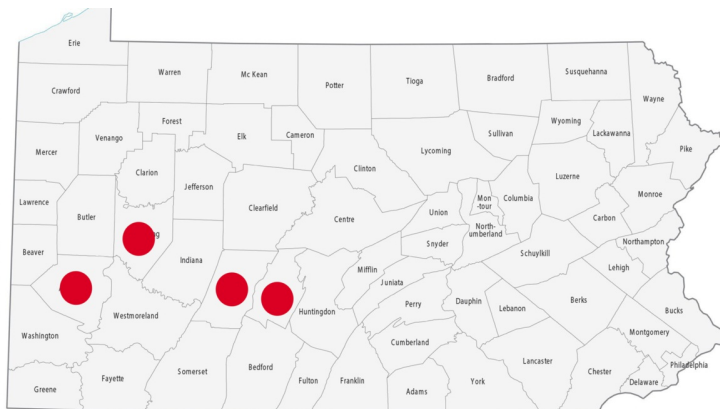
**COUNTY(IES):**

ALLEGHENY, BLAIR,  
ARMSTRONG,  
CAMBRIA

**DATE(S):** APRIL  
2024-?

**NATURE OF EVENT:**  
BENZODIAZEPINE-  
CUT DOPE  
DETECTED

**ADVERSE EVENTS:** UNKNOWN



BENZODIAZEPINES, a class of central nervous system depressant used to treat anxiety and insomnia, have been identified in four samples of dope in four different counties in Western Pennsylvania. While benzodiazepines and opioids can be used safely together when prescribed by a doctor, given their potentiating effect on opioids, they are a particularly dangerous cut when mixed with illicit opioids of unknown potency. The risk of marked respiratory depression, coma and even death is higher with so-called “benzo-dope” than with “tranq-dope” or fentanyl alone. While benzodiazepines do not respond to naloxone, the opioid reversal agent is still indicated for benzo-dope ODs since it will mitigate the synergy of the combined drugs by neutralizing the effects of fentanyl.

**PA GROUNDHOGS** supplies benzodiazepine test strips with its field kits. If you live in the western part of Pennsylvania we strongly encourage you to use them. For a primer on how to use immunoassay strips [click here](#).

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## DETAILS

*On April 1, 2024 PA Groundhogs received two samples of suspected fentanyl for analysis: one from Ford City, in Armstrong County, and one from Altoona, in Blair County. The samples were forwarded to the Center for Forensic Science Research & Education (CFSRE), in Horsham, PA, for analysis where they were found to contain the benzodiazepine analog Bromazolam as the dominant substance in both samples:*

- **SAMPLE ONE:**

- FORD CITY, ARMSTRONG COUNTY

**Bromazolam** (1p), Fentanyl (0.6p), Xylazine (9.1p), Naproxen (1.9p), Caffeine (1.3p), 4-ANPP (0.1p)

- **SAMPLE TWO:**

- ALTOONA, BLAIR COUNTY

**Bromazolam** (1p), Fentanyl (0.3p), para-Fluorofentanyl (trace), Xylazine (0.7p), Caffeine (0.2p), 4-ANPP (0.1p), Ethyl-4-ANPP (trace), Dimethyl sulfone (trace)

*On April 8, PA Groundhogs received two more samples of suspected fentanyl, one from Carnegie, in Allegheny County and the other from Johnstown in Cambria County. They were forwarded to (CFSRE) for analysis. The sample from Carnegie, which was packaged in a yellow glassine bag, tested positive for more than six psychoactive substances including two benzodiazepine analogs and N-Desethyl Isotonitazene. While most were in trace amounts indicating potential cross contamination, how these drugs interact with each other is unknown **PLEASE USE EXTREME CAUTION IF YOU ENCOUNTER THIS BAG***

- **SAMPLE THREE:**

- CARNEGIE, ALLEGHENY COUNTY

Fentanyl (1p), **Bromazolam** (0.5p), para-Fluorofentanyl (0.1p), **Flubromazepam** (0.1p), Heroin (trace), Cocaine (trace), N-Desethyl Isotonitazene (trace), Valeryl fentanyl (trace), Methylmethcathinone (trace), Xylazine (4p), Procaine (0.5p), Phenethyl-4-ANPP

- **SAMPLE FOUR:**
- JOHNSTOWN, CAMBRIA COUNTY

Heroin (1p), Fentanyl (0.6p), para-Fluorofentanyl (0.2p), Methamphetamine (0.1p), **Bromazolam** (trace), PCP (trace), Caffeine (1.2p), Lidocaine (0.4p), 6-Monoacetylmorphine (0.2p), 4-ANPP (0.2p), Xylazine (0.1p), Acetylcodeine (0.1p), Phenethyl-4-ANPP (trace)

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## HARM REDUCTION

With few exceptions almost all Benzodiazepines are hydrophobic, which means they do not dissolve in water. According to [Cayman Chemical](#), it takes 1ml of methanol to dissolve 1mg of bromazolam. Injectors, who typically use a third of a milliliter of water to prepare a shot are likely to see bromazolam particulate, which ranges in color from white to light peach, collecting undissolved at the bottom of their cooker or filtered out by their cotton. Opioid smokers, and particularly snorters face the highest risk of benzo-dope overdose due to the higher rate of absorption via those routes of administration. Symptoms include extreme lethargy, suppressed breathing and lowered heart rate. People who use benzo-dope report amnesia, or blackouts. All users of illicit opioid in Western PA should strip test their drugs for benzodiazepines.

## ANALYSIS

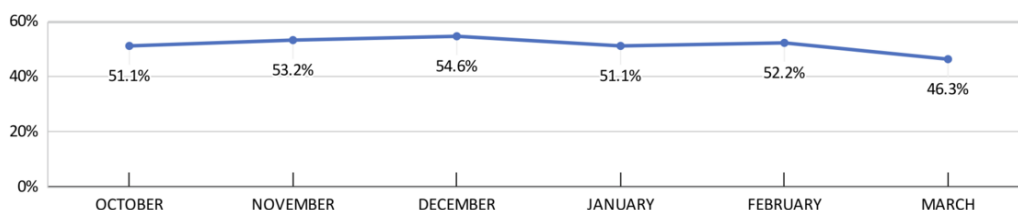
The entrance of unscheduled benzodiazepine analogs into the illicit drug economy has had both positive and negative effects from a harm reduction perspective. On the one hand the influx of novel benzos like bromazolam and flualprazolam facilitated the virtual elimination of fentanyl as an additive to counterfeit Xanax (alprazolam). In the five years since we have been running mass spec analysis on street drugs together with the Philadelphia Department of Public Health, not a single pressed benzodiazepine pill has revealed levels of fentanyl consistent with intentional adulteration.

Today, people who use drugs in most urban centers across the U.S. can have a high degree of confidence that when they buy counterfeit alprazolam they are getting some type of benzodiazepine or associated analog. By all accounts this is a safer environment, protecting both opioid naive purchasers, as well as benzo dependent buyers, who can experience dangerous and potentially fatal side effects if cut off from the drug.

Elsewhere, however, novel benzos have provided dope cutters, or, “millers,” a cheap and plentiful adulterant to stretch their fentanyl supply. Much like xylazine, benzodiazepine analogs may provide a stronger and extended high to people who use opioids. Unlike xylazine, which is an alpha-2 agonist, benzodiazepines and their analogs are central nervous system depressants and when taken with opioids have a synergistic effect that increases the risk of fatal respiratory failure.

So-called “benzo dope” began appearing in Canada during the Covid pandemic and today dominates the illicit opioid supply, with more than 70 percent of opioid samples testing positive for at least one benzodiazepine in some parts of Canada. According to authorities in British Columbia the number of overdose fatalities caused by a novel benzo (predominantly etizolam) and fentanyl combo rose from 15 percent in July 2020 to 60 percent in May 2021. As recently as March 2024, benzo analogs were present in roughly 50 percent of all illicit opioid samples, according to testing from British Columbia’s Drug Checking Service:

#### Percentage of opioids testing positive for benzodiazepines in the past 6 months



Since July 2023 when the Drug Enforcement Administration scheduled five popular benzodiazepine analogs (etizolam, flualprazolam, clonazepam, flubromazolam, and diclazepam), Bromazolam has emerged as the dominant benzodiazepine analog on the market by a long shot. Not to be confused with Bromazepam—a Schedule IV controlled substance used to treat anxiety disorders in humans—Bromazolam was synthesized in 1976 but never brought to market. It spread rapidly on the east coast, first through Maryland and Pennsylvania, and it is now the dominant benzo analog in counterfeit Xanax.

The drug has roughly the same potency as alprazolam, but is more sedating, according to user reports. But only if taken at the same dose (1-2mg). Wholesale pill pressers interviewed by [Narcomedia.org](https://narcomedia.org) said they regularly receive orders for thousands of 6mg pills--or three-times the starting dose recommended by research chemical enthusiasts.

Bromazolam is currently unscheduled in the U.S. and is available in tincture form on the clear web. The powder, which ranges in color from white to light pink, is exported by labs in China. In March the World Health Organization recommended that Bromazolam be placed under international control as a Schedule IV substance. With countless other novel benzos already in existence and even more not yet conceived it remains to be seen what takes Bromazolam's place. .

PA GROUNDHOGS is in the process of assessing counterfeit benzo composition in other parts of the commonwealth and will share that information as we process it.

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[PA Groundhogs](#) (PAG) is a collaborative effort between [The Center for Forensic Science Research & Education](#) (CFSRE); Penn State University's Consortium on Substance Use and Addiction; The Pennsylvania Harm Reduction Network (PAHRN); and [Narcomedia.org](https://narcomedia.org). We offer free street-to-lab drug checking designed to mitigate public health threats from the influx of new and potentially dangerous synthetic drugs into Pennsylvania. We accomplish this through the distribution of immunoassay test strips for fentanyl, xylazine and benzodiazepines, as well as randomized testing of small amounts (10mg) of illicit substances at The Center for Forensic Science Research & Education, a DEA-certified lab based in Horsham, PA.



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