

Xylazine Test Strips: Reducing Stigma and Embracing Harm Reduction

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Hamilton County Public Health (HCPH) provides services to those battling addiction, known as “harm reduction.” Harm reduction includes needle exchange programs, free naloxone distribution, and free fentanyl test strips. According to the latest Hamilton County Public Health Report published in 2022, 14,329 people visited the syringe exchange program with 977,275 syringes distributed to community members through the Harm Reduction program³. Multiple programs such as these are present across the country, providing safe resources for those with substance use disorders. However, in a survey conducted at the Maryland syringe services programs (SSPs), “among the 212 participants who had intended to buy an opioid, 87.7% were exposed to fentanyl, fentanyl analogs, or both, and 85.8% were unknowingly exposed to xylazine⁷.”

Xylazine, a drug often used as a veterinary tranquilizer, is an illicit street drug that has become increasingly prevalent throughout the country, including the streets of Cincinnati¹. Xylazine can often have adverse health effects, slowing breathing, decreasing heart rate, and lowering blood pressure to dangerous levels. Xylazine is also seen to cause skin wounds that do not heal⁶. The potent drug has been mixed with opioids like fentanyl, often leading to serious adverse medical problems and increasing risk of overdose. Xylazine was detected in 42% of presumptive overdoses in the first quarter of 2024 in Hamilton County⁴. Moreover, xylazine was detected in 153 of the 334 overdose deaths in Hamilton County in 2023, representing 45.8% of overall overdose deaths for the county⁴. Alarming, there were 3468 xylazine-related deaths in 2021, and the number is rising⁷.

Unlike other opioids, xylazine does not respond to naloxone; this stresses the importance of avoiding unintended contamination which can be done through the use of testing strips. Similar to fentanyl testing strips, which have shown to be effective.

Xylazine test strips are currently illegal in Ohio, resulting in a significant increase in adverse health effects and barriers to care.⁸ This also increases the strain and cost on the health care system as preventable injury and disease². Since the implementation of Hamilton County Health Department's distribution of fentanyl test strips, emergency department visits due to overdose calls have trended down overall. Xylazine continues to be rampant problem across Hamilton County 43% of drug overdoses show the presence of xylazine contamination. Xylazine test strips, like fentanyl test strips, will increase harm reduction practices and generally reduce the overall burden of xylazine related healthcare costs has on healthcare systems in Ohio⁵.

Based on our literature review and previous community outreach efforts, we believe that Xylazine test strips should be made available to decrease harm within the community. We state our case here with evidence and hope that we can convince you that harm reduction is essential to decrease negative health outcomes in the community which you serve. Since the Hamilton County Health Department already has the established infrastructure to distribute resources like these through the Safe Services Program, xylazine test strip accessibility can be easily incorporated into the current program. We ask the City of Cincinnati for support in legalizing xylazine testing strips.

References:

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