



# National intelligence network on drug health harms briefing: September 2020

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This briefing is based on the latest meeting of the national intelligence network (NIN) on the health harms associated with drug use. It includes topics covered at the June meeting and has been updated with the latest information in each case.

The NIN is made up of representatives from drug treatment services, local authority public health and commissioning teams and national professional and membership bodies. Network meetings are chaired by Dr Michael Kelleher, consultant addictions specialist and clinical lead for Lambeth Addictions at the South London and Maudsley NHS Foundation Trust.

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## 1. COVID-19

### Response and guidance

Public Health England (PHE) published updated COVID-19 [guidance](#) for drug and alcohol service commissioners and providers in July 2020.

The early response to the pandemic, and related PHE guidance, aimed to help and protect drug and alcohol treatment services (including pharmacies) and their service users.

PHE is encouraging services to bring back face-to-face recovery interventions where it is safe and appropriate, and in line with COVID-19 guidance. An important part of this will be increasing hepatitis C testing and treatment and resuming hepatitis B vaccination schedules, where they have been interrupted.

Learning from the initial response to the pandemic will be crucial. There will be issues to address and consider for the future, including:

- individual assessments for supervised consumption of opioid substitution treatment
- how to best balance digital and face-to-face interventions
- learning from innovation and good practice

### Intelligence and alerts

Since lockdown began, early indications suggest that overall national drug supply has been resilient but at a local level there have been fluctuations in price, purity and availability. You can find more information in the [summary for professionals](#) from the Drug Harms Assessment and Response Team (DHART).

PHE has issued a [national alert](#) about illicit benzodiazepines that are being sold and packaged as legitimate products. These drugs have been causing overdoses, hospitalisations and deaths in different parts of the country.

Pills that have been consistently linked to cases are:

- blue pills with 'DAN 5620' on one side and '10' on the other
- white pills with 'TEM 20' on them
- other pills with 'Bensedin' and 'MSJ' on them

These pills often have packaging or markings that suggest they contain diazepam, alprazolam or temazepam but they actually contain more potent drugs. These are usually benzodiazepines or benzodiazepine analogues like flualprazolam, etizolam or flubromazolam.

Since the alert was issued on 24 July there have been more reports which show that these pills are in circulation in across the country.

As well as sharing information on these dangerously potent benzodiazepines, the alert provides advice for:

- people in contact with those at risk of harm
- local authority and health commissioners
- emergency departments and paramedics

Often these drugs are taken with other drugs. Benzodiazepines used with opioids (like heroin), alcohol or gabapentinoids (like pregabalin) can dangerously reduce breathing.

A synthetic cannabinoid receptor agonist (SCRA) called MDMB-4en-PINACA has shown up in the 'spice' and 'mamba' supply in Manchester, Birmingham and Stoke-on-Trent. This has resulted in increased ambulance callouts. [The European Monitoring Centre on Drugs and Drug Addiction](#) (EMCDDA) is gathering intelligence on this substance under its 'intensive monitoring' process. It is being treated as a new psychoactive substance that "might pose severe public health or social risks".

If you have further reports of this substance being linked to harm or found in the spice and mamba supply, please send them to [UKfocalpoint@phe.gov.uk](mailto:UKfocalpoint@phe.gov.uk).

As well as routine drug surveillance activity, PHE has been working with organisations like the [Welsh Emerging Drugs & Identification of Novel Substances Project](#) (WEDINOS) and [Release](#) to monitor changes in the drug market and drug use during lockdown. You can share intelligence on drug markets and harms with [drug.alerts@phe.gov.uk](mailto:drug.alerts@phe.gov.uk).

## 2. Hepatitis C

PHE published the [Hepatitis C in England report](#) for 2020, along with supporting materials. [The report](#) shows an increase in testing and diagnosis among people who inject drugs and a long-term increase for people taking up treatment. Local operational delivery networks will be using new data collection and reporting systems available in the coming months.

The [Hepatitis C Trust](#) continue their work supporting access to treatment in drug services and raising awareness of hepatitis C infection among the main risk groups. This includes people who are homeless, in prison, and the UK South Asian population. They do this by developing and implementing patient-centred hepatitis C interventions like peer support, rapid testing, and a confidential helpline.

There are plans to introduce testing in community pharmacies this year, and through outreach services for people who are homeless.

The report also contains a section on the impact of COVID-19 which describes the:

- changes to service provision and access to services
- impact on data collection, surveillance, monitoring and evaluation
- impact on drug use behaviours, public health outcomes and longer-term service provision

### **3. Dame Carol Black review of drugs**

The Home Office published the findings from part one of the Dame Carol Black [independent review of drugs](#) on 28 February 2020. It focused on the current drugs market, law enforcement and treatment provision in the UK.

The second stage of the review will make recommendations to the government about what commissioning and accountability mechanisms should be put in place. For young people, there will be recommendations on prevention and treatment services.

### **4. ASSESS – Anabolic Androgenic Steroid Use Population Size Estimation: First Stage Study**

The Anabolic Androgenic Steroid Use Population Size Estimation: First Stage Study (ASSESS) is progressing but has been impacted by COVID-19. The project will produce a realistic and reliable estimate of the number of people using anabolic androgenic steroids (AAS) in the UK using existing datasets and other intelligence sources.

Liverpool John Moores University, Manchester Metropolitan University, the University of Birmingham and Public Health Wales are collaborating on the project.

If you have or know of any data that systematically records AAS use and can be accessed by the study group, please contact [Viv Hope](#) and [Jim McVeigh](#).

### **5. UK drug situation annual report**

The UK Focal Point on Drugs has published its latest [UK drug situation annual report](#). The report pulls together information from the devolved countries and administrations of the UK. It covers:

- the prevalence of drug use
- national and regional policy and legal framework

- prevention and treatment of drug use
- the drug situation in prisons
- drug-related deaths
- disease and other harm
- the illegal drug market