Health Alert: *Patients throughout New Jersey and surrounding states at risk of controlled dangerous substance withdrawal due to disruption in access to medications*

Background

On March 12, 2025, The New Jersey Department of Health (NJDOH) was informed of a prescriber disruption involving a Monmouth County, New Jersey based medical doctor who prescribed controlled dangerous substances (CDS). On March 7, 2025, the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) served an immediate suspension order to the doctor, resulting in an immediate inability to prescribe CDS. Patients receiving care from this provider were receiving prescriptions for medications such as buprenorphine, methadone, opioid pain relievers, benzodiazepines, and stimulants. Further, some patients have been receiving prescriptions for opioids and benzodiazepines concurrently.

This incident has led to a disruption in access to CDS for approximately 500 patients, leaving patients at-risk for withdrawal symptoms due to an abrupt discontinuation of these medications, or overdose if they turn to the illicit drug market. Abrupt withdrawal from benzodiazepines can be life-threatening.

The disruption is expected to impact patients throughout the entire state, with clusters of patients in Camden, Gloucester, Burlington and Middlesex counties, as well as some patients in New York, Pennsylvania, and Florida. NJDOH was informed that patients were being seen predominantly via telehealth and e-prescribing, making this patient population difficult to reach/identify. Additionally, NJDOH was informed that there was significant diversion of medications to the illicit drug supply associated with this practice. Disruptions to the illicit supply in New Jersey (i.e., replacement of diverted pills with pressed/illicitly manufactured pills, which may contain fentanyl and adulterants) are therefore anticipated to occur as a result of this disruption.

This health alert is being issued to alert providers to the potential health concerns for impacted patients.

What are Benzodiazepines?

Benzodiazepines are Schedule IV classified depressants that produce sedation and hypnosis, relieve anxiety and muscle spasms, and can also reduce seizures. Common brand-named benzodiazepines include Valium (diazepam), Xanax (alprazolam), Ativan (lorazepam), and Klonopin (clonazepam). Tolerance and dependency to benzodiazepines can develop with frequent use.

Benzodiazepine Withdrawal Health and Safety Risks

Abrupt discontinuation of benzodiazepines can lead to withdrawal symptoms, which can be mild, severe, or life-threatening. Symptoms of benzodiazepine withdrawal include:

- Anxiety
- Tremors

- Irritability
- Insomnia
- Nausea/Vomiting
- Heart Palpitations
- Seizures
- Hallucinations
- Death

Onset of withdrawal symptoms associated with benzodiazepine discontinuation can vary based on the half-life of the medication prescribed and the dosage taken.

What are Opioids?

Opioids are medications prescribed by doctors to treat persistent or severe pain. They are often used by people with chronic headaches and backaches, by patients recovering from surgery or experiencing severe pain associated with cancer amongst other health ailments. While they are effective in relieving pain, there are risks with opioid use and they can be highly addictive. The risk of addiction is especially high when opioids are used to manage pain over an extended period of time.

Opioid Health and Safety Risks

Side effects of opioid use include fatigue, constipation and nausea. Opioids can also cause more serious side effects that can be life-threatening such as slowed or stopped breathing, slowed heart rate and loss of consciousness.

Some patients who lose access to their medications and are unable to access care may try to obtain medications from an illicit source. **It is important to know that any pill that is not obtained directly from a pharmacy may contain fentanyl**. Fentanyl is a powerful opioid, which can increase the risk of a fatal overdose.

Recommendations for Health Care Providers

It is critical that patients who are prescribed CDS who lose access to their prescribing provider are re-connected to healthcare services as quickly as possible. Patients with a primary care provider should be encouraged to contact them immediately to discuss next steps in care. If the patient does not have a primary care provider, they should be encouraged to call the number on the back of their insurance card to receive help in finding an in-network provider to continue receiving care. Patients without health insurance coverage can be seen at a community health center by visiting findahealthcenter.hrsa.gov.

Providers are also encouraged to:

- Counsel patients on the risks of abrupt discontinuation of CDS and withdrawal symptoms, particularly for benzodiazepines as withdrawal for these medications can be life-threatening.
- Provide person-centered, non-judgmental, and trauma-informed care to patients.
- Educate patients about counterfeit pills in the illicit drug supply and the dangers of fentanyl. Remind patients that any pill that was not directly obtained from a pharmacy may contain fentanyl, which increases the risk of a fatal overdose. This includes pressed

opioid and benzodiazepine pills. Patients who are naïve to fentanyl (e.g., those obtaining controlled substances from a regulated source) are at an extremely high risk of overdose if exposed to fentanyl.

- Carry naloxone (Narcan) and encourage its use when a person's respiration is depressed, or if an opioid overdose is suspected.
- Provide information about harm reduction and safer use tips, including use of fentanyl test strips, trying a different route of administration, carrying naloxone, and going slow/using less with a new substance.
- Refer individuals to local harm reduction agencies or other trusted, community-based providers available to connect patients to needed resources (i.e., sterile syringes, overdose education, HIV testing, fentanyl test strips, etc.). For more information on New Jersey's Harm Reduction Centers, visit https://www.nj.gov/health/hivstdtb/hrc/.

Where to get Naloxone (Narcan)

- NJ residents can obtain naloxone freely and anonymously at participating pharmacies. Information and locations are available at https://nj.gov/humanservices/stopoverdoses/.
- In addition to local harm reduction centers, the New Jersey Harm Reduction Coalition mails naloxone kits confidentially and for free to anyone who needs them, regardless of insurance status. You can call or text 1-877-4NARCAN or visit www.nextdistro.org/newjersey.

Treatment and Support

- ReachNJ is a 24-hour-a-day, 7 day-a-week hotline where people who have substance use disorder (SUD) or friends and family of people with SUD can get immediate assistance and support from live, New Jersey-based, trained addiction counselors. Call 1-844-ReachNJ (1- 844-732-2465).
- 988 is the nationwide 3-digit dialing code for Mental Health Crisis and Suicide Prevention. 988 will connect people to the existing National Suicide Prevention Lifeline. Compassionate, accessible care and support will be available for anyone experiencing mental health-related distress, thoughts of suicide, mental health or substance use crisis. People can also dial 988 if they are worried about a loved one who may need crisis support.

For more information, please contact Amanda Gan at the New Jersey Department of Health at Amanda.Gan@doh.nj.gov. For media inquiries, please visit the link below and complete the digital press intake form at https://www.nj.gov/health/news/home/contact.shtml.