

Tapentadol use among people who regularly inject drugs in Australia

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Based partly on a post-marketing surveillance study (contact Amy.Peacock@unsw.edu.au for further information).

Background

Tapentadol is a centrally acting opioid analgesic registered for use in Australia to treat moderate to severe pain. Clinical trials suggest that tapentadol provides analgesia for acute and chronic pain similar to oxycodone and morphine [1,2], but with lower abuse potential [3]. A recent review by the World Health Organisation Expert Committee on Drug Dependence highlighted a lack of data regarding “abuse, dependence, diversion, or recreational use”, noting that tapentadol generally does not feature in drug use surveys or surveillance reports [4]. This paper addresses this research gap by examining patterns of tapentadol use among a sentinel sample of people who regularly inject drugs (PWID) in Australia.

Findings

In 2017 and 2018, we conducted interviews with PWID recruited in Australian capital cities as part of the Illicit Drug Reporting System (IDRS). Findings showed that:

- Few (<1%) PWID had used tapentadol (prescribed and/or non-prescribed) in the past six months
- Even fewer participants reported recent non-prescribed use. A small number reported injecting tapentadol; no participants reported snorting tapentadol.
- For comparison, 54%, 22%, and 14% of the 2018 sample reported heroin, non-prescribed morphine, and non-prescribed oxycodone use, respectively, in the past six months (see the [National IDRS report](#)).
- In 2017, <1% (n=2) reported a lifetime non-fatal overdose following tapentadol use, equating to 18.2% of those who reported lifetime tapentadol use. Non-fatal overdose following tapentadol use was not assessed in 2018.

	2017 N=888 % (n)	2018 N=905 % (n)
Any tapentadol use		
Lifetime use	1.5 (13)	3 (23)
Lifetime injection	0.5 (4) [^]	1 (8)
Past six month use	0.6 (5)	0.9 (8)
Past six month injection	0.1 (1)	0.2 (2)
Prescribed tapentadol use		
Lifetime use	1 (8) [^]	0.8 (7)
Lifetime injection	0.4 (3) [^]	0.3 (3)
Past six month use	0.3 (2)	0.3 (3)
Non-prescribed tapentadol use		
Lifetime use	0.9 (7) [^]	2 (17)
Lifetime injection	0.1 (1) [^]	0.7 (6)
Past six month use	0.3 (3)	0.6 (5)

[^]Figures refer to sustained release; all other figures refer to both sustained and immediate release formulations.

Conclusions

There was a low level of exposure to tapentadol (prescribed or not prescribed) amongst this sentinel sample of PWID. There were indicators of self-reported non-prescribed use, tampering (specifically, injection), and harms associated with tapentadol but currently on a smaller scale relative to other opioids. Greater accumulation of evidence over time and with greater population-level availability will be critical to understand extra-medical use and harms associated with tapentadol.

References

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