

DRUG WORSE THAN FENTANYL SOLD IN VAPES

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A highly dangerous synthetic opioid more powerful than fentanyl and responsible for deaths around the world is being sold in vape liquid, leading to an Australian-first arrest and an urgent public health warning.

The NSW Police Force said on Wednesday that members of Strike Force Southminster had charged a man with supplying nitazene-laced vape liquid.

The strike force was set up to investigate the supply of nitazenes across Sydney amid rising concerns about the drug being linked to overdoses in Australia and globally. A Victorian coroner found in April that there had been 23 deaths involving nitazenes in that state since 2021. These included friends Michael Hodgkinson, Thomas Vale, Abdul El Sayed and Carly Morse, found dead in a home at Broadmeadows in Melbourne from a mass nitazenes overdose in June last year.

The group thought they were taking cocaine, but ingested a synthetic drug 100 times more powerful than heroin, the coroner found.

Detective Superintendent John Watson, commander of the NSW drug squad, said the distribution of the drug in vape liquid was deeply concerning. “Nitazenes are highly addictive, incredibly potent and can be lethal. By lacing vape liquid with these synthetic opioids, suppliers are deliberately creating dependency – hooking users to ensure repeat business. It’s calculated, dangerous and entirely profit-driven,” he said.

“This is the first time in Australia someone has been charged with supplying nitazene-laced vape liquid, which demonstrates a disturbing evolution in the illicit drug trade.”

He added: “This is also an important time to remind the public that vaping nicotine without a prescription is illegal in NSW – and when you buy illicit vapes, you have no idea what’s inside. You could be inhaling dangerous chemicals, heavy metals or, in this case, a synthetic opioid that’s stronger than fentanyl.”

A report published in the Medical Journal of Australia in March noted the first detections of nitazenes on the nation’s shores was in 2021. Australian wastewater analysis initially did not detect nitazenes, but “routine monitoring by this method for new psychoactive substances is limited”, the journal report stated.

Two days after the report was published, separate University of Queensland research revealed nitazenes had been detected in wastewater for the first time.

NSW Health chief addiction medicine specialist Hester Wilson said on Wednesday the department was concerned.

“It is important that people recognise the signs of an opioid overdose early and know how to respond,” Dr Wilson said. “Symptoms can include pinpoint pupils, drowsiness, loss of consciousness, slow breathing/snoring or skin turning blue or grey. If you witness someone experiencing any of these symptoms after using drugs, give naloxone if you have it, and call triple-0 immediately.”

NSW police said Strike Force Southminster detectives executed a search warrant at Revesby on Friday, seizing vape hardware, vials, cash, two imitation firearms and an electrical weapon. A 20-year-old man was arrested and charged with supplying a prohibited drug in commercial quantities and knowingly dealing with criminal proceeds. He allegedly sold vials marketed as “supercharged”. On Monday, a safe seized by police at Revesby was opened, revealing 1.8kg of nitazene, bringing the total seized to 2.1kg.

The Australian Federal Police said in December that nitazenes – along with being sold in powders, tablets, nasal sprays and vape liquids – could also be falsely marketed as cocaine, MDMA, GHB and counterfeit pharmaceuticals.

AFP Commander Paula Hudson said at the time that the drug was considered a greater threat to the Australian community than the better-known synthetic opioid fentanyl, which has claimed thousands of lives in the US and Canada. “Nitazenes are considered 10 times more potent than fentanyl and, to put that in perspective, around 2mg of fentanyl – or the equivalent of the size of two grains of salt – is considered lethal,” Commander Hudson said. “Taking nitazenes is like playing Russian roulette – it’s a serious gamble and even the smallest amount can lead to a fatal overdose.”

Coroner David Ryan said in his findings in the deaths of the four Melbourne friends that nitazenes were developed by the pharmaceutical industry in the 1950s. The opioid was practically unknown until around 2019, when it started to appear in drug markets across Europe and North America, and had since spread to Australia.