



Emerging Drug Threat: Nitazenes

Nitazenes are extremely powerful synthetic opioids increasingly found in counterfeit pills, powders, vapes, and other unregulated products—often without the user knowing. Because they are significantly stronger than fentanyl, even a very small amount can cause someone to stop breathing and lead to a life-threatening overdose very quickly. In Missouri, recent wastewater testing in schools has detected nitazenes in several communities, indicating that young people may be unknowingly exposed to these drugs through substances they believe are “safe” or familiar.

Nitazenes are difficult to detect without specialized laboratory testing, and overdoses may require more than one dose of naloxone. For these reasons, schools, families, and communities play a critical role in raising awareness, preventing harm, and preparing to respond safely.

Where to Start

1. Review Current Policies and Procedures

Assess how your school currently addresses substance use on campus. Compare existing practices to the recommendations in this guide.

2. Identify Gaps and Set Goals

Work with administrators, counselors, school nurses, safety teams, and family engagement staff to identify areas for improvement.

3. Designate a Lead Staff Person or Team

Assign responsibility for coordinating prevention activities, training, and communication with students and families.

Recommendations for Schools

Campus Policies

- Adopt, fully implement, and clearly communicate comprehensive alcohol-, drug-, tobacco-, and vape-free campus policies.
- Ensure policies are consistently and fairly enforced for all students, staff, and visitors.

Prevention Education

- Provide evidence-based prevention curricula for all appropriate grade levels.
- Teach students about the risks of using unregulated or unlabeled products—including vapes, synthetic cannabis, and items purchased from gas stations or online—which may contain dangerous substances like nitazenes.
- Remind youth never to take pills that were not prescribed to them and did not come directly from a pharmacy; counterfeit pills are common and often appear identical to prescription medications, but may contain nitazenes, fentanyl, or other dangerous drugs.

Overdose Preparedness

- Ensure staff know how to recognize signs of an opioid overdose, including slowed or stopped breathing, unresponsiveness, or blue/gray skin or lips.
- Stock and maintain naloxone on campus, train staff in its use, and note that multiple doses may be needed for nitazene-related overdoses.
- Understand that fentanyl test strips cannot detect nitazenes, so families and students should not rely on test strips to determine safety.

Recommendations for Schools Cont.

Family and Community Engagement

- Provide families with guidance on how to talk with children, even young children, about substance use, including vaping, in age-appropriate ways.
- Share information about nitazenes and fentanyl in a calm, supportive, non-fear based way that focuses on safety and informed decision-making.
- Encourage community members to stay alert to illicit or unregulated products products being sold, shared, or used in or near schools.

Student Support and Treatment Resources

- Promote easy access to school-based and community-based substance use and mental health services.
- Connect students to appropriate treatment resources when concerns arise.
- Ensure supports are accessible for students, employees, contractors, parents, and visitors.

Building Positive School Climate

- Engage students in leadership, prevention efforts, peer support, and activities that build a school environment of trust and community.
- Promote lifelong healthy behaviors and supportive relationships.

Supportive Discipline

A supportive discipline approach focuses on student learning, safety, and connection—rather than punishment. It:

- Minimizes the involvement of law enforcement whenever possible.
- Supports academic success and healthy development of all students.
- Uses layered supports to prevent substance use and intervene early when concerns arise.

Supportive Discipline Framework

Product Removal

Remove the substance from the student and the school environment.

Family Engagement

Notify parents/guardians promptly. Engage families in conversations about challenges, access to substances, and how to work together to support the student's well being.

Restorative Conversations

Provide supportive discussions to help students develop healthier coping strategies, reflect on decisions, and plan for positive change.

Evidence- Based Education and Treatment Support

Use alternative to suspension educational programs focused on substance use and safety. Connect students with treatment providers or school-based services when needed.

Resources

Policy

- [Comprehensive Tobacco-Free School Campus Policy](#): Refer to the School Prevention Guide and Missouri's Guide to Creating a Comprehensive Tobacco & Vape-Free School District.
- Find prevention, cessation and policy resources at DHSS, [Tobacco Use Prevention and Control](#) and Alliance for a **Healthier Generation** [Tobacco-Free and Vape-Free Schools](#).

Evidence-Based Prevention Education

- [Cannabis Awareness and Prevention Toolkit](#)
- Opioids and other drugs: [Drug Prevention and Intervention Toolkit](#)
- [CATCH My Breath](#), [Tobacco Prevention Toolkit](#), [Vaping: Know the Truth](#), [ASPIRE](#) or [Tobacco Prevention and Education Resource Center](#)
- [LifeSkills® Training](#)
- [ENGAGE](#) – the Center for Disease Control and Prevention's Evidence-Based Strategies to Prevent Youth Substance Use
- [National Institute on Drug Abuse](#) – science-based information for educators and parents about drug use, health, and the developing brain

Alternative-to-Suspension Substance Education

- Cannabis: [Healthy Futures](#)
- Tobacco: [Healthy Futures](#) or [INDEPTH](#)

Promote Treatment

- Find local youth and adult treatment facilities for mental health and substance use disorders at the Department of Mental Health, [Locating Treatment & Services](#).
- Find local crisis hotline numbers at [Time2ActMissouri](#)
- For tobacco cessation, students can access [My Life, My Quit](#) or [NOT for Me](#), and adults can access [Missouri Tobacco Quit Services](#).
- School or other professionals can access tobacco cessation training through [ACT to Address Youth Cessation](#), [Not On Tobacco](#) or [Tobacco Treatment Specialist training](#).
- In a behavioral health crisis, call or text 988 or visit [Missouri988](#). Students experiencing a behavioral health crisis can visit [Suicide Prevention and 988 Guide for Missouri Schools](#).
- Connect with a [Community Behavioral Health Liaison](#) in your area.

Be Prepared (Poisoning/Overdose)

- Schedule a training for your school on overdose education and naloxone distribution (OEND) at <https://mimhaddisci.org/training>.
- For cannabis or tobacco, call the [Missouri Poison Center](#) at 1-800-222-1222 or call 9-1-1. See [What to Do If My Child Consumes Cannabis](#), [Nitazenes](#) or experiences [Nicotine Poisoning](#).
- For more information on how to respond to an overdose, administer naloxone or order naloxone, find information at [GetMissouriNaloxone](#) or [Time2ActMissouri](#).
- Learn how to set up a school naloxone program and administer it through the [National Association of School Nurses Learning Center](#).
- Get Overdose Awareness resources at <https://sites.google.com/view/overdoseawareness>. Materials include display graphics, print materials and videos to help educate school staff, community members, students and families on how to recognize an overdose and how to administer naloxone.

- Find information on hemp-derived products at [Health Advisory - Hemp-Derived Intoxicating Cannabinoids](#) and [Hemp-Derived Cannabinoids](#).

Resources for Parents

- [Tips for Talking and Listening to Teens About Drugs and Alcohol](#)
- [Growing Up Drug Free: A Parent's Guide to Substance Use Prevention](#)
- “[Talk. They Hear You.](#)” Campaign and resources for parents, caregivers and community partners to reduce underage drinking and other substance use among youths under the age of 21.

Contact

- **Adolescent and School Health Program:** 573-751-1364
Ben Pringer, benjamin.pringer@health.mo.gov
- **Injury and Overdose Prevention and Response Program**
Tiffini Wright, tiffini.wright@health.mo.gov
- **Tobacco Prevention and Control Program:** 573-522-2820
Christy Inskip, motobaccoprogram@health.mo.gov

Potential Partners

- [Local Public Health Agencies](#)
- [Regional Prevention Resource Centers](#)
- [Midwest High Intensity Drug Trafficking Area \(HIDTA\)](#)
- Local coalitions
- Health care providers
- Behavioral health providers
- Community organizations



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