



Irish Needle Exchange Forum

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Irish Needle Exchange Forum is encouraging services across Ireland to be on the alert for **increased overdose and other health risks** among opiate users following reports of low purity heroin in various parts of the country.

Recent extreme weather conditions in Ireland could be adding to these risks.

For some weeks there have been reports from across the UK and Ireland about reduced quality/purity in some areas and apparent heroin 'droughts' in other areas. At least 10 people were hospitalized in Surrey last month after injecting a substance being sold as heroin which actually contained a potentially lethal sedative called alprazolam. In Hastings a contaminated batch of heroin also led to a high number of people seeking hospital treatment

INEF has received recent reports of similar issues in various parts of Ireland

These include:

- heroin is of **too poor quality to be smoked**
- people are **switching to other substances** or **supplementing heroin** with other substances and this is resulting in some regular clients not engaging with services .
- New injectors are presenting to services, some of **whom have never injected** before.
- Heroin is congealing in the 1ml needles , some clients are using the 2.5ml – **increasing the overdose risk when the purity level increases**. A drought lowers the tolerance making it more likely to **overdose** when the drought ends and the purity of heroin improves. Experts believe that good quality heroin will most probably be back in the first half of 2011 and when that happens there are likely to be a lot of overdoses,“ .
- Clients are reporting that they are using butter to cook up the Heroin which is making it more fluid to inject .

Recent severe weather may also have disrupted/be disrupting heroin supply or may have prevented/be preventing people from collecting substitute medication or attending needle exchanges.



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The INEF is concerned about the possibility of **increased overdose risk** due to:

- **increased poly-substance use** (including benzodiazepines, methadone and alcohol) to compensate for poor quality/lack of heroin
- **unknown adulterants/contaminants** in poor quality heroin
- **reduced tolerances** among people moving to new/poly-drug use
- **reduced tolerances** among people when they resume heroin use/heroin quality improves
- **switching from smoking heroin to injecting heroin** by people wishing to increase the intoxicating effect of poor quality heroin.

Injecting infection risks

Concern over other health risks arises from the possibility of:

- **increased injecting practice** by users switching from smoking
- drug users having to **re-use or share injecting equipment** due to lack of access to clean supplies because of recent extreme weather conditions.
- **New users** presenting as injectors

Injecting drug use - especially through using contaminated injecting equipment - carries increased risk of serious infection through the **transmission of bloodborne viruses - including Hepatitis C** - and harm through infection from a **wide range of bacteria**.

The unknown adulterants/contaminants in heroin may also carry a bacteriological **It is not known if contaminated heroin is present in Ireland** .



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Other bacteriological infections which could cause serious health problems for injecting users come from:

- staphylococcus
- streptococcus
- wound botulism
- tetanus
- necrotising fasciitis

Communicate

Tim Bingham from The Irish Needle Exchange Forum says

"It is extremely important to reinforce overdose awareness and prevention and as well as other health risk messages to staff and drug users just now so that action can be taken to try to reduce the possibility of serious harm to drug users.

"The current heroin supply situation has significant potential to cause death through overdose and serious health problems for drug users - not only now but in the future.

"Recent extreme weather conditions may be adding to health risks for drug users and, with similar forecasts for the coming weeks, careful thought will have to be given to how to ensure people have **access to substitute medication, clean equipment, injecting site/wound care and appropriate overdose and health advice.** The weather is preventing from some clients accessing the services and we are advising supplying extra clean equipment and foil if the extreme weather returns. Please inform the outreach team(s) if a client hasn't presented to your service for a period of time.



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"Topics which may be worth considering include:

- **overdose prevention measures** for drug users who decide to use the heroin drought as an opportunity to home detox from heroin. In this situation people often use other drugs, including benzodiazepines and alcohol, to support them during this process and this carries its own dangers
- **remind clients about the recovery position**, and dialling 999 or 112
- encouraging drug users to **look out for signs of contaminants/adulterants** in heroin which may themselves carry overdose risk.
- **encourage** clients to use in the same peer group, rather than injecting alone
- **advise** the clients that in the cold weather it maybe more difficult to raise a vein.
- If your service is closed for a period of time over Christmas please inform your clients what other services are available to them

"Frontline workers can play a part in spotting the signs and symptoms of injecting-related infection in drug users and **encouraging/assisting them to seek medical attention.**

Irish Needle Exchange Forum is seeking information on any changes in the heroin drought and its consequences or any sign that supplies are returning to normal.

Please send any information to tim@inef.ie