

Gas Station Heroin (Tianeptine) An Emerging Threat

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Introduction

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NBC News Report – January 31, 2024



What is Gas Station Heroin?

7-[(3-chloro-6-methyl-5,5-dioxo-11H-benzo[c][2,1]benzothiazepine-11-yl)amino]heptanoic acid

What is Gas Station Heroin?

Common name: **Tianeptine**

Trade names: “ZaZa,” “Tianaa,”
“Pegasus,” “Neptune’s Fix”

Tianeptine is being sold across
Virginia in a bottle that makes it
look like a vitamin supplement



What does Gas Station Heroin look like?

How is Gas Station Heroin being marketed?


- Products containing tianeptine are being marketed as dietary supplements that improve brain function and treat conditions like anxiety, depression, pain and opioid use disorder.
- Tianeptine is used as an *antidepressant* in other countries, but it is not FDA-approved for use in the USA.
- Tianeptine is mostly sold in Virginia in gas stations and convenience stores – thus the name “gas station heroin”
- Most Tianeptine products contain “proprietary blends”

How does Tianeptine affect users?

Tianeptine can be highly addictive



At high doses, Tianeptine activates the same opioid receptors in the brain – despite it being an antidepressant, not an opioid



Side effects include agitation, drowsiness, confusion, sweating, rapid heartbeat, high blood pressure, nausea, vomiting, slowed or stopped breathing, coma and death, seizures, loss of consciousness, tremors, and death. Withdrawals similar to opioid use.

Recent Rise in Gas Station Heroin Use

Tianeptine has been available in the United States since at least 2000. It is legal in Europe, Asia, and Latin America under the name “Coaxil” or “Stablon.”

According to the DEA, “tianeptine is abused for its euphoric properties similar to other opioids, such as heroin.”

Tianeptine abuse has increased significantly in the United States since 2014.

Recent Rise in Gas Station Heroin Use

However, amidst the recent crackdown on opioid sale and use, users have turned to tianeptine, a cheaper, more easily obtained alternative that provides opioid-like effects

Tianeptine is still “non-illegal” in many states, as well as under federal law. The FDA and federal government have yet to take official action to ban it.

Sources:

<https://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/volumes/67/wr/mm6730a2.htm>

https://www.deaiversion.usdoj.gov/drug_chem_info/tianeptine.pdf

What has the national response been to Gas Station Heroin?

Tianeptine is currently banned by law in Alabama, Georgia, Indiana, Michigan, Minnesota, Ohio, and Tennessee.

The FDA, CDC, and DEA have issued literature warning the public about the dangers of tianeptine abuse.

Congress can criminalize possession/sale of tianeptine by adding it to the Controlled Substances Act.

What is Virginia doing about Gas Station Heroin?

- The Office of the Attorney General backed a bill that would have added tianeptine to the Virginia Drug Control Act in the 2024 legislative session.
- However, the Virginia Board of Pharmacy issued an emergency order on January 31, 2024 (effective February 28, 2024) adding tianeptine as a Schedule I controlled substance
- As of February 28, 2024, tianeptine/Gas Station Heroin is a Schedule I controlled substance in Virginia and can be seized and prosecuted
- Class 5 felony to possess tianeptine, unclassified felony with penalty of 5-40 years in prison for distribution

Virginia Board of Pharmacy Emergency Scheduling Order

D. Pursuant to subsection D of § 54.1-3443 of the Code of Virginia, the Board of Pharmacy places the following in Schedule I of the Drug Control Act:

1. Synthetic opioid.

a. N-ethyl-2-[5-nitro-2-[(4-propan-2-yloxyphenyl)methyl]benzimidazol-1-yl]ethanamine (other name: N-desethyl Isotonitazene), its isomers, esters, ethers, salts, and salts of isomers, esters, and ethers, unless specifically excepted, whenever the existence of these isomers, esters, ethers and salts is possible within the specific chemical designation.

b. 7-[(3-chloro-6-methyl-5,5-dioxo-11H-benzo[c][2,1]benzothiazepin-11-yl)amino]heptanoic acid (other name: Tianeptine), its isomers, esters, ethers, salts, and salts of isomers, esters, and ethers, unless specifically excepted, whenever the existence of these isomers, esters, ethers, and salts is possible within the specific chemical designation.

2. Cannabimimetic agent. Ethyl-3,3-dimethyl-2-[(1-(pent-4-enylindazole-3-carbonyl)amino]butanoate (other name: EDMB-4en-PINACA), its salts, isomers, and salts of isomers whenever the existence of such salts, isomers, and salts of isomers is possible within the specific chemical designation.

The placement of drugs listed in this subsection shall remain in effect until July 31, 2025, unless enacted into law in the Drug Control Act.

Source: <https://www.dhp.virginia.gov/media/dhpweb/docs/pharmacy/forms/leg/Pharmacy02282024.pdf>

What is Virginia doing about Gas Station Heroin?

- A Schedule I drug “has high potential for abuse” and “has no accepted medical use in treatment in the United States or lacks accepted safety for use in treatment under medical supervision.”
- The Virginia Department of Forensic Science is now testing for the presence of tianeptine in all drug submissions
- The emergency scheduling order for tianeptine expires on July 31, 2025 unless the General Assembly enacts a law scheduling it.
- The Office of the Attorney General will partner with the General Assembly to carry legislation in the 2025 session to formally classify tianeptine as a Schedule I controlled substance in perpetuity

Questions and
thoughts?

