



PHENACETIN FOUND IN COCAINE

08 August 2024 (Gold Coast, Queensland)

Summary

- CheQPoint Burleigh Heads tested two samples (white powder) expected to be cocaine. We identified a mixture of cocaine and phenacetin
- Phenacetin is an analgesic (painkiller) that was withdrawn (and then banned) from markets in the 1960s-1980s because it can cause kidney damage and cancer.^{1,2}
- You're more likely to experience acute (immediate) adverse effects (e.g. cardiac events, hallucinations) related to cocaine if you take phenacetin at the same time.³

What is phenacetin?

Phenacetin was one of the ingredients found in "Bex Powders" - a common over-the-counter pain reliever that was popular in Australia until it was discovered that phenacetin can cause kidney damage and cancer. Phenacetin was removed from the Australian market in 1983, and it's no longer used clinically.

Why are we concerned?

International research suggests that phenacetin is one of the more common adulterants added to cocaine.⁴ This doesn't make it safe: many adulterants increase toxicological effects of cocaine which creates unpredictable health risks.⁵ People are more likely to experience cardiac effects (e.g. chest pain, abnormal heartbeat) and hallucinations if they have taken cocaine with phenacetin, compared to cocaine by itself.³ There has been relatively little research into the effects of phenacetin when taken via the nose (intranasally), when taken with cocaine, or when taken in variable amounts.

What are the short term effects of phenacetin?

We know that at high doses, phenacetin can interfere with the way blood carries oxygen. This can lead to headaches, dizziness, fatigue and fingertips and lips turning blue. In very high doses, it can lead to respiratory depression (slow breathing) and death.⁶

Harmful acute (immediate) effects are more likely if you take larger phenacetin doses, or in people who have particular metabolism issues or some health conditions. The amount of phenacetin in contaminated cocaine batches can vary hugely, which makes it hard to predict how much phenacetin you're taking in any given dose.⁷



What are the longer term effects of phenacetin?

Phenacetin has been found to have toxic effects on kidneys, liver, blood and cardiovascular systems. Phenacetin can cause bladder and urinary tract cancers, and can cause serious damage to the kidneys and liver.⁴

Harm reduction recommendations

- **Get your drugs checked** - Phenacetin can be detected by our analytical equipment. Get your drugs checked at CheQpoint Burleigh Heads (Thursday 2pm-6pm) or CheQpoint Bowen Hills (Friday 2pm-6pm).
- **Overdose involving phenacetin can be dangerous** - Seek urgent medical assistance if you experience trouble breathing, dizziness, headaches, or notice blue fingertips or lips after using cocaine.
- **Watch out for symptoms of longer term phenacetin exposure** - Symptoms of longer term phenacetin exposure can be vague and hard to spot. It could include fatigue, dizziness, anemia, changes in frequency of urination.
- **Talk to a health professional if you are concerned** - Let them know you've been using cocaine, and you're concerned that you might have been exposed to phenacetin.

Information sources

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4. Gamberio et al. (2019). "Toxicological analysis of cocaine adulterants in blood samples" <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0379073819300878>
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7. Canadian Centre on Substance Use and Addiction (2020). "Adulterants, Contaminants and Co-occurring Substances in Drugs on the Illegal Market in Canada"