



## Emerging Threat of Protonitazene

(U//FOUO) This document provides situational awareness regarding an uptick in the rise of lab submissions identifying protonitazene in Florida. Protonitazene threatens to increase the risk of opioid overdoses in the United States. The Florida Department of Law Enforcement (FDLE) monitors and analyzes major drug trends that may impact the state.

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### Key Findings

- **(U//FOUO)** - Protonitazene is a new potentially lethal synthetic narcotic emerging in the illicit drug market nationwide.<sup>1</sup>
- **(U//FOUO)** - Recent data showed an increase in FDLE lab submissions identifying protonitazene in combination with other illicit drugs.<sup>2</sup>
- **(U//FOUO)** - According to the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA), protonitazene is unlikely to be trafficked in large quantities comparable to fentanyl.<sup>3</sup>
- **(U//FOUO)** - Protonitazene is unlikely to replace fentanyl but continues to be identified in combination with cutting agents distributed by small scale dealers.<sup>4</sup>

**(U//FOUO)** - Protonitazene is one of eight synthetic opioid derivatives listed under the nitazene category in the benzimidazole-opioids class. In January 2022, the DEA temporarily scheduled this opioid as a Schedule I substance of the Controlled Substances Act (CSA). Protonitazene is not approved for medical use in the United States.<sup>5</sup>

**(U//FOUO)** - Protonitazene is a synthetic opioid three times more potent than fentanyl and 100 times more potent than morphine and binds to the same opioid receptors. Similar to fentanyl, protonitazene has a high potential for addiction and abuse. Since 2019, several opioid derivatives have emerged in the drug market nationwide. As of 2023, Texas and Virginia are among many states nationwide that have recently identified the emergence of protonitazene in 2023 threat assessments.<sup>6,7</sup>

**(U//FOUO)** - Florida crime labs began to identify protonitazene in 2020. In 2023 YTD, FDLE identified 36 submissions in 31 separate cases from Jacksonville, Tampa Bay, and Orlando Regional Operation Centers. Statewide drug and analog results show protonitazene identified in 1 JROC, 11 TBROC, and 24 OROC submissions. FDLE labs only identified protonitazene once in 2022. Besides FDLE, Pinellas County identified protonitazene 12 times in independent county lab reports in 2022.<sup>8</sup>

**(U//FOUO)** - Protonitazene has been identified in liquid and powder forms, usually combined with fentanyl or xylazine. Protonitazene binds to opioid receptors similar to fentanyl and morphine. Side effects of protonitazene can range from difficulty breathing, disorientation, and bluish nails and lips, to rapid sedation, heart failure, or sudden death. Opioid-reversal agents, such as Narcan, may be adequate but may require additional doses to reverse the effects of protonitazene.<sup>9</sup>

**(U//FOUO)** - In July 2022, DEA reported bulk manufacturing of nitazenes, such as protonitazene, is challenging and unlikely to be trafficked by transnational criminal organizations (TCOs). Manufacturing protonitazene is a multi-step process requiring precise lab equipment and a highly

skilled chemist. According to the DEA, protonitazene is unlikely to replace fentanyl because Mexican TCOs, the primary manufacturers of fentanyl, likely do not have access to the expertise or equipment needed to produce protonitazene in large quantities and with purity comparable to fentanyl. Protonitazene is most likely ordered on the dark web and shipped in small quantities from China.<sup>10</sup>

**(U//FOUO)** - Since Protonitazene is obtainable via the dark web on a smaller scale and found in combination with other drug mixtures, such as xylazine and caffeine, there is a likelihood that, on occasion, local street dealers will continue to distribute protonitazene, therefore increasing the risk of opioid overdoses.<sup>11</sup>

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Send feedback comments or suggestions to: [Fusionfeedback@fdle.state.fl.us](mailto:Fusionfeedback@fdle.state.fl.us) (Please reference the Product #).

Approval Authority: FL 8900  
Author: FL 8846  
Source: Florida Department of Law Enforcement

DHS HSEC Addressed: HSEC-5  
Additional Standing Information Needs (SINS) Addressed: FSINS 4.3, 4.3.3.1, 4.8 FFC SINS 5.1, 5.5, 5.8

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Form Rev 1.5

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- <sup>1</sup> (U//FOUO) Virginia Fusion Center. 2023 Threat Assessment. April 04, 2023  
<https://hsin.dhs.gov/collab/ES/CommunityDocuments/2023VirginiaThreatAssessment.pdf>
- <sup>2</sup> (U//FOUO) Email. Florida Department of Law Enforcement Crime Lab Staff. June 16, 2023.
- <sup>3</sup> (U//FOUO) Drug Enforcement Administration. Nitazenes: A Reemerging Synthetic Opioid Group Bulletin. DEA-DCT-BUL-053-22. July 2022  
<https://hsin.dhs.gov/collab/Intel/Lists/CommunityDocuments/2022-11-30>.
- <sup>4</sup> (U//FOUO) Texas Fusion Center Information Bulletin. Law Enforcement seizes Novel Synthetic Opioid Protonitazene, Pill Press dies in Austin, Texas Metropolitan Area. November 30,2022 Report # 2021-11-30.1
- <sup>5</sup> (U//FOUO) Virginia Fusion Center Highlight #22-13. New Lethal Substance, Protonitazene, identified in Virginia. July 27, 2022. <https://fcfra.wildapricot.org>
- <sup>6</sup> (U//FOUO) Houston HIDTA. May 2023 Threat Assessment. Identification of Nitazenes in fake Prescription Pills in the Houston Metropolitan Area.
- <sup>7</sup> (U//FOUO) Virginia Fusion Center. 2023 Threat Assessment. April 04, 2023.  
<https://hsin.dhs.gov/collab/ES/CommunityDocuments/2023VirginiaThreatAssessment.pdf>
- <sup>8</sup> (U//FOUO) Email. Florida Department of Law Enforcement Crime Lab Staff. June 16, 2023.
- <sup>9</sup> (U//FOUO) Houston HIDTA. May 2023 Threat Assessment. Identification of Nitazenes in fake Prescription Pills in the Houston Metropolitan Area.
- <sup>10</sup> (U//FOUO) Drug Enforcement Administration. Nitazenes: A Reemerging Synthetic Opioid Group Bulletin. DEA-DCT-BUL-053-22. July 2022  
[https://hsin.dhs.gov/collab/Intel/Lists/CommunityDocuments/BUL-053-22 Nitazenes A Reemerging Synthetic Opioid Group.pdf](https://hsin.dhs.gov/collab/Intel/Lists/CommunityDocuments/BUL-053-22%20Nitazenes%20A%20Reemerging%20Synthetic%20Opioid%20Group.pdf)
- <sup>11</sup> (U//FOUO) Drug Enforcement Administration. Nitazenes: A Reemerging Synthetic Opioid Group Bulletin. DEA-DCT-BUL-053-22. July 2022  
[https://hsin.dhs.gov/collab/Intel/Lists/CommunityDocuments/BUL-053-22 Nitazenes A Reemerging Synthetic Opioid Group.pdf](https://hsin.dhs.gov/collab/Intel/Lists/CommunityDocuments/BUL-053-22%20Nitazenes%20A%20Reemerging%20Synthetic%20Opioid%20Group.pdf)