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Observations and Concerns about Tramadol Abuse in Alaska

Alaska State Trooper Statewide Drug Enforcement Unit (SDEU) Investigators are aware Tramadol is being abused in ever increasing amounts within the State. Law enforcement personnel have observed significant increases in shipments and internationally shipped package seizures by Federal law enforcement authorities of this pain medication. Presently Tramadol is not scheduled as a controlled substance in Alaska; accordingly, state and local jurisdictions cannot seize the drug for prosecution without a federal justice's approval. This lack of local authority impairs the ability of Alaska law enforcement to deter trafficking and abuse of Tramadol.

Tramadol pills, also called "Trams," are selling for approximately 5-10 dollars per pill depending on where in Alaska the pills are being sold. As word of mouth increases the demand for the drug and its price go up. However, it is readily available on the internet and is relatively inexpensive, which also contributes to the pain medication's increased popularity. Abuse of this drug takes place despite warnings about the side effects, which includes extreme drowsiness, cold and clammy skin, shallow or labored breathing, slow heartbeat, extreme weakness, feeling light-headed, fainting, seizures, cardiac arrest or coma.

School aged children are common abusers of the drug, with ease of acquisition and low cost factoring into this choice. However, at least one SDEU Investigator believes the age range of the Tramadol abuser runs anywhere from 16 to 70 years of age. It is also his experience that Tramadol is frequently abused in conjunction with other substances due to its capacity to increase the effects of alcohol, marijuana, and other drugs. Tramadol is also taken in larger than recommended doses by itself when people can't get anything else to mix it with.

Anecdotal information derived from law enforcement Interdictions in general and those conducted by the Alaska State Troopers Statewide Drug Enforcement Unit:

An Interdiction Officer from the North Slope Borough PD relayed information about an adult female and her brother having Tramadol shipped in to the village of Point Hope. Federal officers have intercepted two parcels each containing 1000 Tramadol pills in January and March of 2016.

The DEA Diversion group has seized Tramadol bound for this same person. A Point Hope contact advised Tramadol called "Trams" sell for \$5-10 a pill, based on supply and demand. The "trams" are an opioid substitute with less potency and a lower price than other black-market prescription narcotics. Trams are often

taken in larger dose quantities to achieve the desired physiological effect despite the detrimental side effects. Tramadol is inexpensive and readily available making it a gateway drug for the youth in the outlying villages. The same NSBP Interdiction Officer received information passed on by a resident of the village of Wainwright. The resident advised that Tramadol is showing up in the village from time to time, but the resident did not say who was dealing and had no further details other than “Trams” sell for \$5-10 a pill.

In February of 2017, 48 internationally shipped packages headed for Alaska and containing Tramadol were seized by federal officers.

Results for a simple search in GOOGLE using the words “purchase tramadol” resulted in the following 7 top searches with pictures: for the investment of 62.99 plus shipping a person can gross \$500.00 to \$1000.00 dollars from selling Tramadol in the villages at the average price of \$5.00 to \$10.00.

The screenshot shows a Google search for "purchase tramadol". The search bar at the top contains the text "purchase tramadol" and a magnifying glass icon. Below the search bar, there are tabs for "All", "Images", "Shopping", "News", "Maps", "More", "Settings", and "Tools". The "All" tab is selected. Below the tabs, it says "About 515,000 results (0.54 seconds)".

The search results are listed on the left side of the page. The first result is "Buy From Safe Pharmacies" with a link to www.safemedsonline.org/. The second result is "Buy Tramadol online without prescription overnight - TRAMADOL" with a link to www.tramadol.co/. The third result is "Order Ultram: Buy Ultram Online Overnight, No Prescription" with a link to orderultram.net/. The fourth result is "Tramadol without prescription overnight delivery. Pill store, lowest prices!" with a link to www.lamorra.com/wordpress/tramadol-without-prescription-overnight-delivery/. The fifth result is "Buy ultram - Arkansas Variety Testing" with a link to arkansasvarietytesting.com/buy-ultram. The sixth result is "Buy Tramadol Online, Cheap Tramadol 100 mg HCL for \$0.7 Online ..." with a link to <https://www.storesea.net/buy-tramadol-100-mg-online>.

On the right side of the page, there is a sponsored advertisement for "Tramadol 50 mg 100 Ct by AMNEAL Pharmaceuticals". The ad shows a bottle of tramadol and a pill. It has a 4.4 star rating from 175 user reviews. The price is \$62.99, and it includes 1-800-PetMeds. It also mentions "Free shipping, no tax". Below the ad, there is a section for "Similar products" which includes "Amitriptyl... HCl 50 mg 100 ct Bottle by...", "Hydroxyz... HCl 50 mg Tab by MUTUAL", and "Hydroxyz... Pamoate 50 mg Capsule...".

In addition to the availability over the internet, locally obtained prescriptions can also be diverted.

More anecdotal information from SDEU Interdiction:

In the Kotzebue area, packages from India have contained over 1000 pills of Tramadol have been intercepted within the last six months. These packages were going to known dealers of other controlled substances residing in the area. An SDEU investigator has been told by village elders and other concerned people that the abuse of pills is on the rise, and that Tramadol is primary among those pills being abused. This investigator has observed that the price of Tramadol has been as low as a dollar per pill when there is an established source in the area.

A concerned citizen in the village of Noorvik reported to the SDEU investigator that she had been contacted (unsolicited) to purchase Tramadol and Gabapentin by a person in the State of Virginia. The drug investigator made covert contact with one of the telephone solicitors. The Investigator was informed by the individual that he could send as many of these pills as he could afford to purchase.

In the Nome area another SDEU investigator has experienced the trans-shipment of Tramadol when he has been assisting US postal investigations. That amount interdicted was approximately 200 pills.

Last month in the Nome area three residents were destined to receive packages of Tramadol that contained about 1000 individual pills. These packages were not from legitimate pharmacies. These shipments were seized by Federal Officers and not prosecuted.

Last month in the Bethel area six residents were destined to receive packages of Tramadol that contained 4200 individual pills. These packages were not from legitimate pharmacies. These shipments were seized by Federal officers, but the quantity did not merit prosecution due to lack of resources.

In the Bethel area Tramadol is being sold and abused in most, if not all, of the surrounding villages in the YK Delta. This has been a problem for at least the last 3 – 4 years, with Tramadol being shipped to the villages in a number of ways. The street price is \$10.00 per pill in this area.

Last month a person from the village of Kipnuk ordered approximately 5000 Tramadol pills. He had them shipped to his mother's residence in Palmer / Wasilla. The federal investigator contacted in this case said a person can currently order as much Tramadol as they want online, and the pills are sent in a package to the ordering address directly from China or India.

In February 2017, Alaska State Troopers have been made aware a significant increase in international package seizures by Federal law enforcement authorities containing large amounts of the prescription pain medication Tramadol. In all cases, these packages were destined for rural Alaska locations – centered mostly in the northwest and southwest regions of Alaska. The individual seize packages contained an average of 500 pills, and a collective amount of seized pills numbering in the thousands. In most every case, the origin of the illicit pill packages was India.