

Understanding the Difference between Subutex and Suboxone

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Suboxone and Subutex are commonly prescribed drugs for medication-assisted substance abuse recovery. Understanding the differences between these drugs can help you accurately assess families, refer to appropriate services, and keep children safe.

Suboxone is the brand name for a drug containing both buprenorphine and naloxone (brand name: Narcan). Naloxone is a medication that reverses the effects of opiates. Because naloxone could be harmful to an unborn child, medical providers generally prescribe Subutex rather than Suboxone during pregnancy. Since Suboxone contains naloxone, abusing opiates alongside Suboxone is unlikely. However, Suboxone is sometimes abused alongside non-opioid drugs, such as benzodiazepines (e.g. Xanax, Valium). Subutex is the trade name for buprenorphine. This drug does *not* contain naloxone. While Subutex is safer for an unborn child, Subutex is able to be abused and can even be abused alongside opiates. Most pregnant women will be prescribed Subutex if the treating provider knows of the pregnancy. Suboxone and Subutex are created in multiple forms, including strip (sublingual) forms. Strips can be melted down, intravenously abused, and cause significant impairment.

If a pregnant woman reports she is taking Suboxone, it could be a "red flag."

If a man or non-pregnant woman reports taking Subutex, it could be a "red flag."

Case Example:

A pregnant mother told a DCS Case Manager (CM) about her prescribed Subutex use and showed a valid prescription. After meeting with the mother, CM obtained medical records. The records showed the mother's prescription, but the drug screens administered by the clinic were positive for buprenorphine, norbuprenorphine, and naloxone. CM believed the mother's drug screen was indicative of only prescribed use. Later in the case, CM learned the mother was purchasing "off the street" and abusing Suboxone.

Strategies and Supports:

Interviewing, drug screening, speaking to medical professionals, and obtaining prescribing provider records are an excellent set of strategies to assess substance use. Simply knowing the difference between Suboxone and Subutex can help inform DCS' decisions. While a DCS drug screen cannot differentiate between Suboxone and Subutex, reviewing prescribing provider drug screens could give you this information. If a provider's drug screens are positive for buprenorphine and norbuprenorphine (a metabolite of buprenorphine) but negative for naloxone, the person is using Subutex. If a provider's drug screens are positive for buprenorphine, norbuprenorphine, and naloxone, the person is using Suboxone. Be aware providers may continue to prescribe Subutex or Suboxone, even if a person is still abusing non-prescribed drugs.