

Tramadol, review of the global situation

1. Tramadol is an opioid analgesic with an opioid like effect when taken orally and is primarily prescribed to treat mild to severe pain in both acute and chronic cases. When taken orally at high doses, tramadol may produce a euphoric sensation similar to oxycodone, when abused. Reported side effects of tramadol include itching, nausea and constipation. Serious side effects include seizures, serotonin syndrome, decreased alertness and dependence. Tramadol was first introduced in West Germany in 1977. Its market presence expanded in the 1990's with introduction in the United Kingdom, United States and Australia. In the United States alone, tramadol prescriptions saw a significant increase from 23 million in 2008 to 37 million in 2013.¹

2. Tramadol is currently not under international control, however as the substance is abused in many countries, controls have been placed at the national level in many countries as a prescription only medicine. In the United States, the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) published revised rules in 2014 making tramadol a federally controlled drug (Schedule IV).² Tramadol is under national control in Bahrain since 2000, in Australia since 2001, in Sweden since 2008, in the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela since 2008, in Ukraine since 2008 and in Iran (Islamic Republic of) since 2007. It is also controlled in Jordan, Saudi Arabia and has been under various levels of control in Egypt since 2002 with the strictest controls in place since 2009. In India, on April 2018, a notification was published in the gazette of India on tramadol's schedule and control. In China, tramadol is listed as a second category psychoactive substance since 2007.³

3. In North Africa and the Middle East, there are widespread misconceptions regarding tramadol among the general population with some viewing it as a mood enhancer, means to increase sexual stamina or as an energy booster during work.⁴ Individuals who abuse tramadol report that such mood-elevating properties cause them to take higher doses of the drug or to take it more often than had been prescribed. Abuse of tramadol for an extended period may cause psychological or physical dependence, increasing the potential for overdose risks. Intoxication with symptoms including coma, cardiac arrest, collapse and respiratory depression or arrest. Fatal poisoning can occur when tramadol is consumed with other drugs or alcohol. In the United States, the number of tramadol related emergency visits tripled from 892 visits in 2005 to 5,181 visits in 2011.⁵

4. In accordance with Resolution 56/14 of the Commission on Narcotic Drugs (CND), INCB transmitted a questionnaire to Member States requesting information on the use and status of tramadol in their country. The Board noted in its 2013 Annual Report that abuse of tramadol was a significant problem in a limited number of countries and that there were growing indications of non-medical use of tramadol and diversion to illicit channels.⁶ According the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNDOC) World Drug Report 2017, there is growing evidence of the non-medical use of tramadol in some countries in Africa and the Middle East. What has been corroborated by seizures of considerable amounts of tramadol in North, West and Central Africa and in West Asia between 2012 and 2014. The high levels of misuse of tramadol are a result of its unregulated prescription and availability in pharmacies and on the illicit market.⁷

5. In December 2017, UNODC warned the international community on the implications of non-medical use of tramadol on the economies and security of West Africa, notably in the Sahel region as well as the Middle East, and the risks posed with its broader linkages in the global fight against

¹ <https://drugabuse.com/library/tramadol-history-and-statistics/>

² https://www.deadiversion.usdoj.gov/drug_chem_info/tramadol.pdf

³ http://www.who.int/medicines/access/controlled-substances/PreReview_Tramadol.pdf?ua=1 WHO.39th ECCD

⁴ <https://www.economist.com/news/middle-east-and-africa/21648690-painkiller-becomes-egypts-favourite-recreational-drug-pill-work-and-play>

⁵ D.M. Bush. *The DAWN Report: Emergency Department Visits for Drug Misuse or Abuse Involving the Pain Medication Tramadol*. (2015), pg. 3 https://www.samhsa.gov/data/sites/default/files/report_1966/ShortReport-1966.pdf

⁶ INCB Report 2013, pg 36, paragraphe 263-268 https://www.incb.org/documents/Publications/AnnualReports/AR2013/English/AR_2013_E.pdf

⁷ UNODC, World Drug Report 2017, Misuse of tramadol in Africa and Asia, pg.(38)

https://www.unodc.org/wdr2017/field/Booklet_2_HEALTH.pdf

terrorism and transnational organized crime. There are indications that tramadol, which is mainly produced in South Asia, is smuggled through the Gulf of Guinea by transnational organized crime networks, towards areas of the Sahel partially controlled by armed groups and terrorist organizations.⁸

6. The World Health Organization's Expert Committee on Drug Dependence has reviewed tramadol five times: in 1992, 2000, 2002, 2006 and 2014. In November 2017, the Committee recommended that tramadol be subject to a critical review at a subsequent meeting citing that there is growing evidence of abuse of tramadol in some African and West Asian countries.⁹ Following the critical review, the Committee will determine whether to recommend to the Commission on Narcotic Drugs that tramadol be placed under international control.

INCB is the independent, quasi-judicial body charged with promoting and monitoring Government compliance with the three international drug control conventions: the 1961 Single Convention on Narcotic Drugs, the 1971 Convention on Psychotropic Substances, and the 1988 Convention against Illicit Traffic in Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances.

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For further information, please contact: INCB Secretariat at Tel: (+43-1) 26060 4163
Email: incb.secretariat@un.org, Website: www.incb.org

⁸ <https://www.unodc.org/westandcentralafrica/en/2017-12-11-unodc-warns-tramadol-use.html>

⁹ 39th WHO ECDD Report, page 45 <http://apps.who.int/iris/bitstream/handle/10665/260546/9789241210188-eng.pdf>