The History of Nitazenes: A Timeline of Emergence & Evolution

1950s – Present

TD consultancy

Executive Summary: From Laboratory Failure to Market Force

Origin (1950s)

Originally synthesized as potential medicines but rejected due to extreme potency and safety risks.

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The Catalyst (2019)

“Rediscovered” by illicit chemists following the global crackdown on fentanyl analogues.

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The Supply Gap (2022)

Proliferated in Europe following the Taliban’s opium ban, filling the void left by heroin shortages.

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Current Status

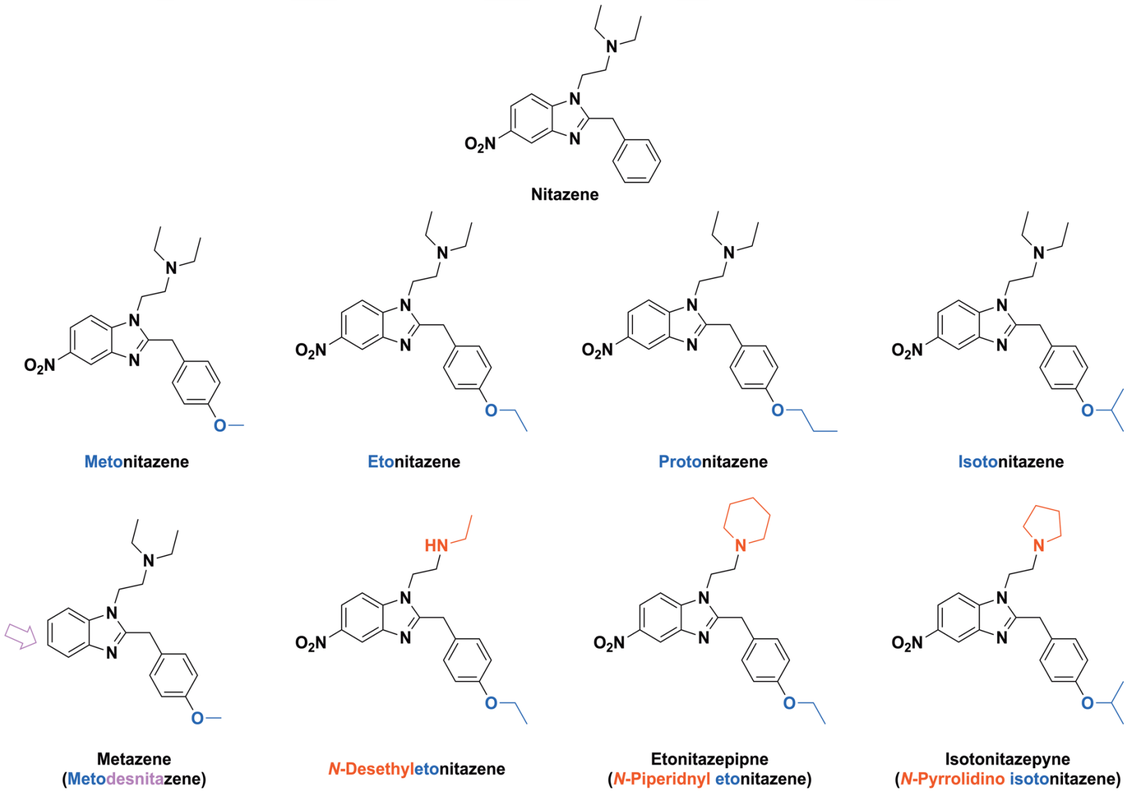
High potency and persistence in the supply chain (often hidden in other drugs) present significant public health challenges.

Defining the Substance: What are Nitazenes?

Core Definition: A class of synthetic opioids scientifically known as 2-benzylbenzimidazole opioids.

Key Characteristics:

- **Potency**: Varies by analogue, but generally ranges from hundreds to thousands of times more potent than morphine.
- **Status**: Unlike fentanyl or oxycodone, nitazenes were never approved or marketed for medical use in humans.
- **Structure**: Distinct chemical structure from the fentanyl family, allowing them to initially bypass fentanyl-specific legislation.



General Chemical Structure

1950s–1970s: Development and Immediate Abandonment

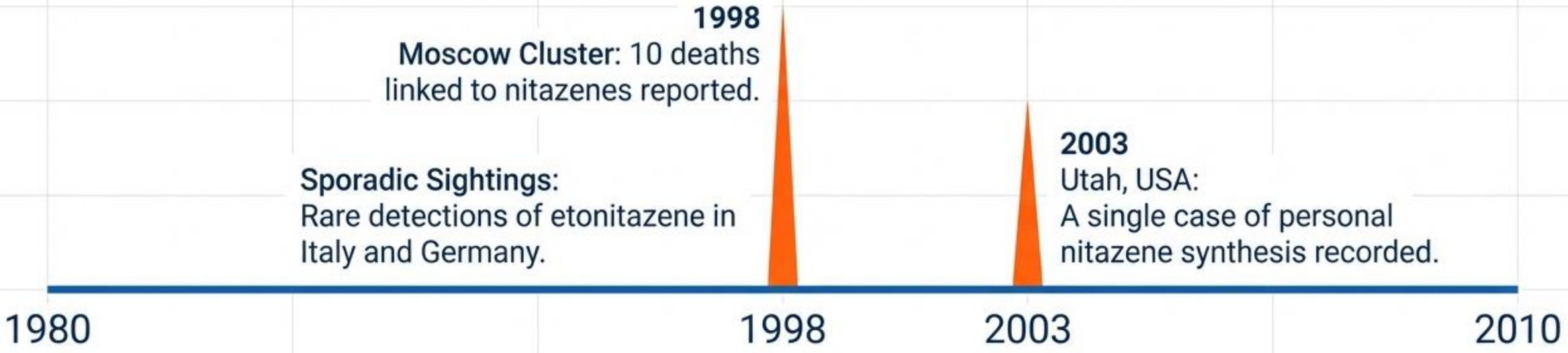
Mid-1950s Swiss pharmaceutical company CIBA AG synthesises etonitazene as a potential analgesic.

1957–1960s Pharmacology papers confirm extreme potency. However, clinical trials reveal a very low therapeutic index (narrow margin between effect and overdose) and severe respiratory depression.

OUTCOME: The drug class is shelved. Nitazenes become a "failed opioid," existing only in specialist literature.

Harm Reduction Implication: The reason for their original rejection—unmanageable toxicity—is the primary risk factor today.

1980s–2000s: The Dormant Phase & Isolated Anomalies



Key Insight: These events were outliers. The global illicit market was dominated by heroin and later fentanyl, leaving no demand for obscure research chemicals.

2019: The Catalyst Event

Result: Nitazenes are ‘rediscovered’.

2019–2021: The Modern Emergence

July 2019: The EMCDDA receives the first notification of isotonitazene in a biological sample.

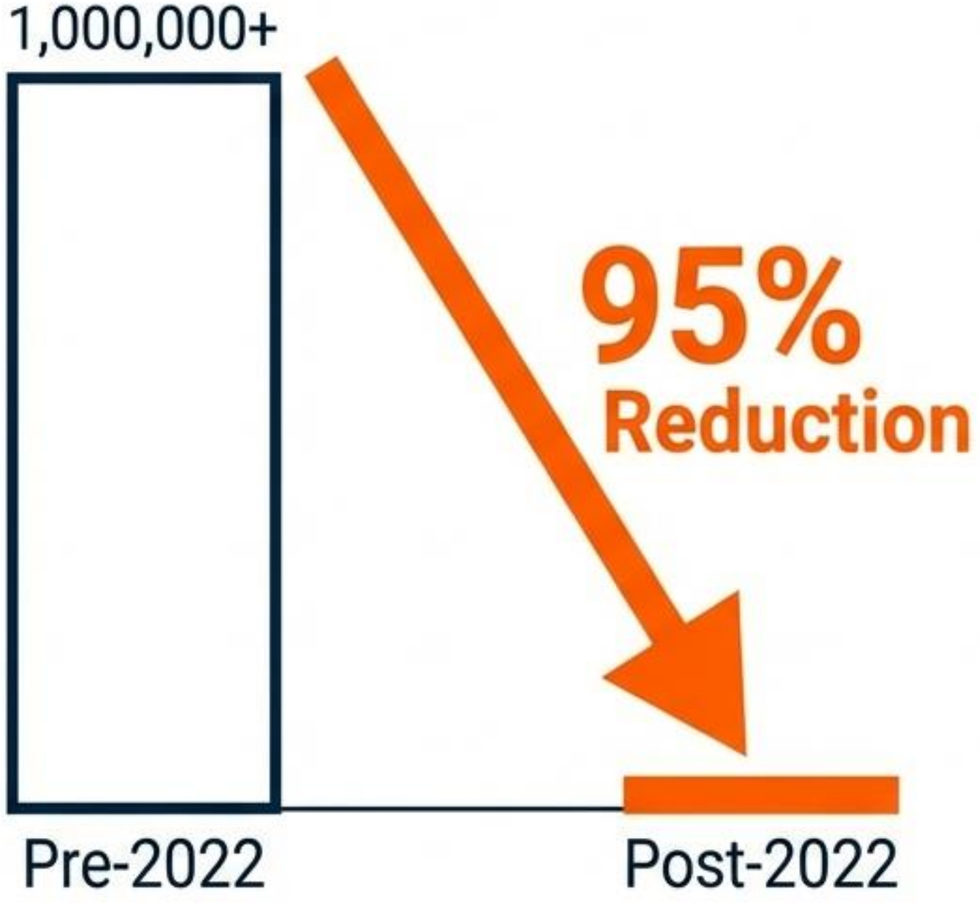
2019: UNODC receives its first report via the Early Warning Advisory.

North American Surge (2019–2021):

- Canada records 615 nitazene/brorphine detections.
- Isotonitazene is the dominant analogue initially.
- **Late 2020:** The first signs of a shift toward Protonitazene appear.

2022: The Global Supply Shock

Opium Poppy Cultivation in Afghanistan



The Event: April 2022 Taliban Opium Ban.

Data: Afghanistan previously supplied ~95% of the UK's heroin market. Cultivation collapses.

The Impact:
A massive 'supply shock' looms for Europe and the UK. As heroin purity drops and prices rise, the market becomes favourable for synthetic opioids (Nitazenes) to fill the potency gap.

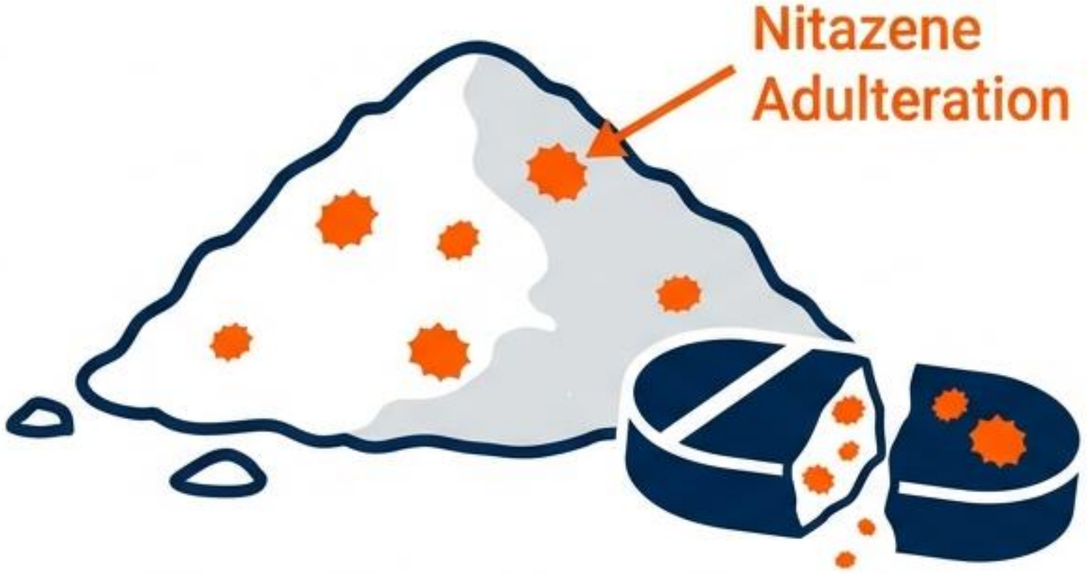
2022–2023: Adulteration and UK Impact

Market Entry: First sustained detections in the UK and Europe appear in adulterated heroin and counterfeit tablets.

Poly-drug Use Alerts:

- May 2022: First known UK death involving Xylazine, often found in mixtures with nitazenes.
- 2023: Clusters of deaths reported in Birmingham/West Midlands. Evidence suggests nitazenes were used to ‘fortify’ low-purity heroin.

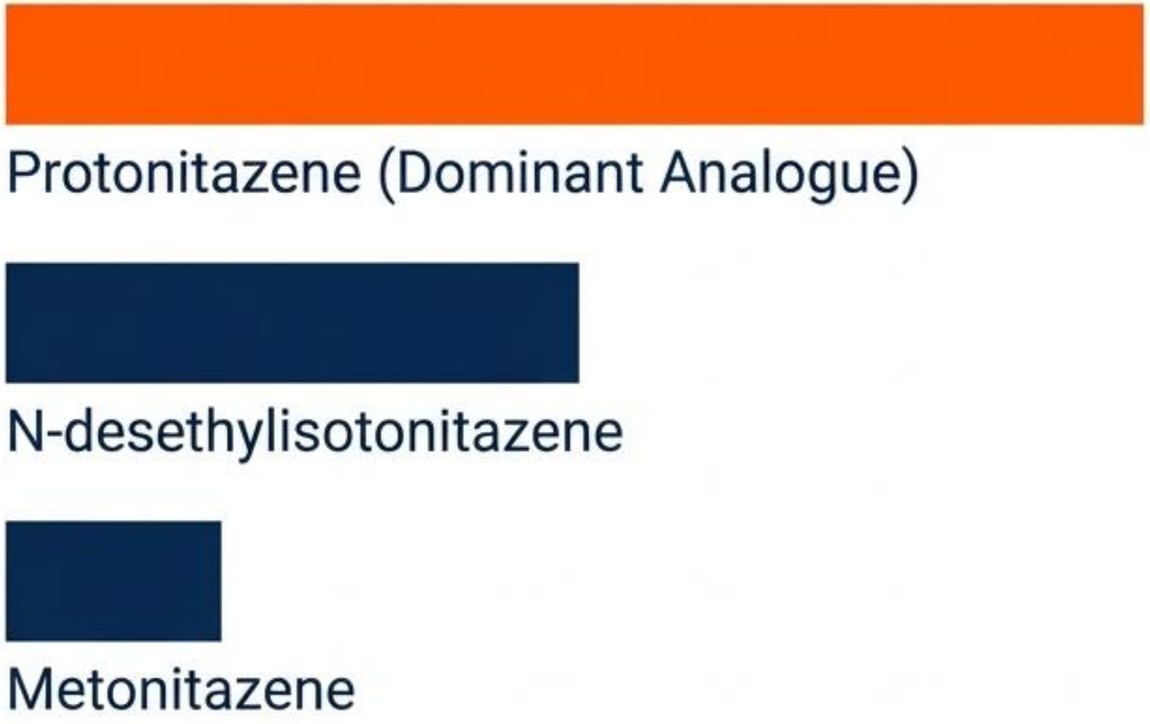
Risk Factor: Users are often unaware they are **consuming synthetics, increasing overdose potential.**



Heroin / Benzodiazepines

2023–2024: The Shift to Protonitazene

Trend: As isotonitazene faces scrutiny, the market shifts to new analogues.



284 Deaths

Linked to nitazenes in the UK
(June 2023 – May 2024).

Public Health Verdict: Officials describe the situation as ‘old drugs causing new problems’.

Supply Chain Dynamics: The Online Marketplace

The Source

Investigations identify Chinese suppliers advertising openly on platforms like SoundCloud and X. Payments made via cryptocurrency.

The Logistics

Shipments to the UK often disguised as dog food or other benign commercial goods to evade customs.

The Dealer Psychology

Seized texts reveal UK dealers were initially reluctant to handle the substance but were persuaded by suppliers offering it as a heroin substitute or enhancer.

2023–2025: The Regulatory Landscape

March 2024 (UK)

Fifteen synthetic opioids (including key nitazenes) classified as Class A drugs. Generic provisions later expanded to cover the whole chemical class.

2024–2025 (International)

Multiple analogues placed under international control by US and EU agencies.

June 2025 (China)

China announces that all nitazenes and 12 other NPS will be brought under narcotic control.

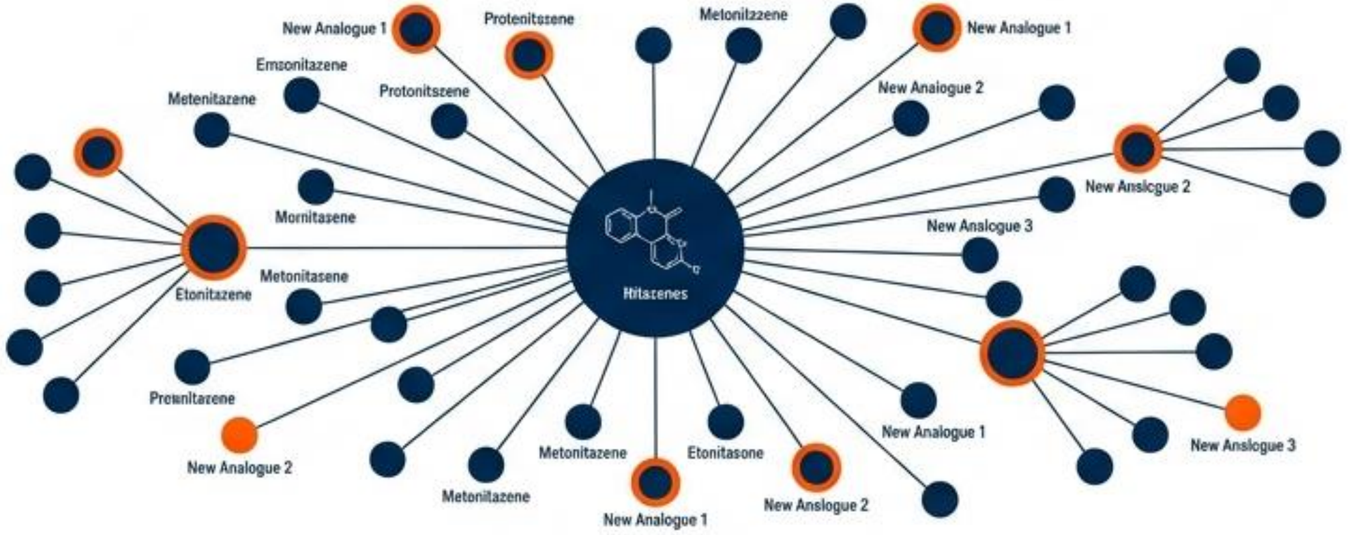
Future Outlook: Displacement vs. Elimination

- **Current Diversity:** By 2025, there are 26 named analogues in the global system.

Prediction: UNODC and European agencies predict the **Chinese** ban will shift the market rather than end it.

- **Global Spread:** Present in dozens of countries, with Protonitazene prominent in the UK and Baltic states.

- **Conclusion:** Nitazenes are likely to remain a fixture of the illicit market indefinitely as chemistry is tweaked to bypass new controls.



Sources & References

- **‘History of Nitazenes’** (Source Document)
- **UNODC** (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime) – Early Warning Advisory
- **EMCDDA** (European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction)
- **UK Office for National Statistics** (Death registrations)
- **BBC** and **Media Investigations** (Supply chain reporting)

Website: https://tonydagostino.co.uk

Written by Tony D'Agostino