

Introduction

- Nitazenes are a group of highly potent synthetic opioids manufactured by clandestine laboratories.
- Rising harms from nitazenes have been reported globally.
- There is some evidence to suggest that these drugs are being sold via cryptomarkets and surface net shops.

Aims

This study describes the availability of nitazenes for purchase in Australia and internationally via cryptomarkets between October 2021 and May 2024.

Methods

- Data on drug listings were collected twice a month from cryptomarkets for the period from October 2021 to May 2024. Substrings (e.g., 'azene', 'tazepyne', 'tazepipne') were used to identify nitazene listings.
- Trends over time in the number of nitazene listings and their percentage as a proportion of all drug listings are presented. The most frequently listed nitazenes and their number of listings over time are also presented.

Implications

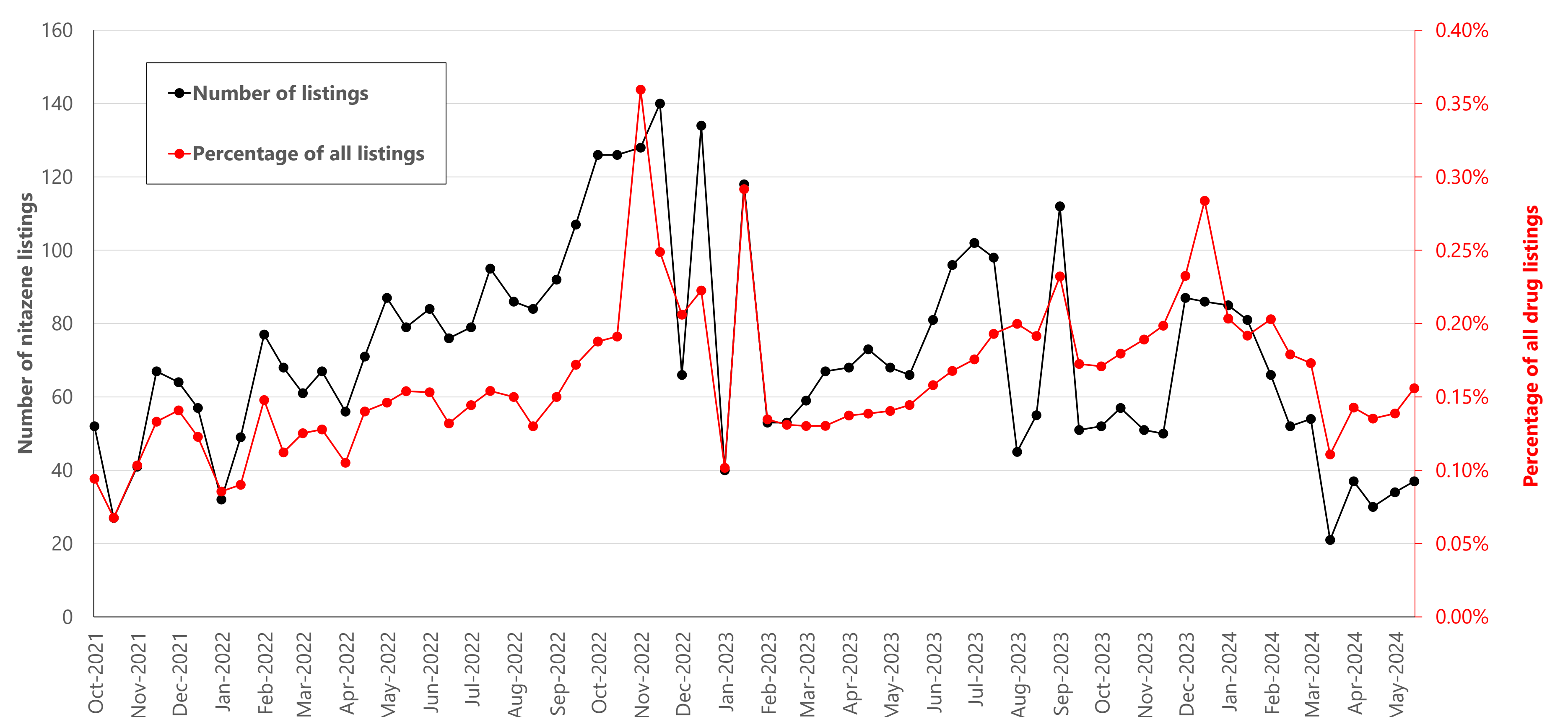
- While nitazene listings decreased with the closure of major markets, number of listings again increased, demonstrating the resilience of cryptomarkets to market disruptions.
- Some of the most common nitazenes identified on cryptomarkets have been identified through clinical and forensic data in Australia. Changes in availability and frequency of specific nitazene listings over time need to be triangulated with other data sources and information to elucidate the reasons for such changes (e.g., changes in scheduling and law enforcement around these drugs in Australia and other countries, the popularity and discussion of these drugs in social media among people who use drugs).
- There is widespread availability of nitazenes for sale on cryptomarkets. Coupled with international evidence of increased availability and overdose from nitazenes, these findings reinforce the importance of strong data monitoring systems that enable timely, sensitive detection of changes in drug markets and harms.

Results

Availability of nitazenes in cryptomarkets

- Of the 32 cryptomarkets studied within October 2021 to May 2024, 25 had at least one nitazene listing. A total of 4563 listings selling nitazenes were identified: this constituted 0.16% of all drug listings in the period.
- Over 3 in 4 listings (79%, n=3627) were listed as available for delivery to Australia, Oceania or worldwide.
- One-hundred and eighty-two unique vendors offering delivery of nitazenes to Australia were identified. The most common countries of vendor origin was USA (n=59) and China (n=21); 118 vendors stated they delivered to Australia, Oceania and/or worldwide.

Figure 1. Trend in number and percentage of nitazene listings on cryptomarkets

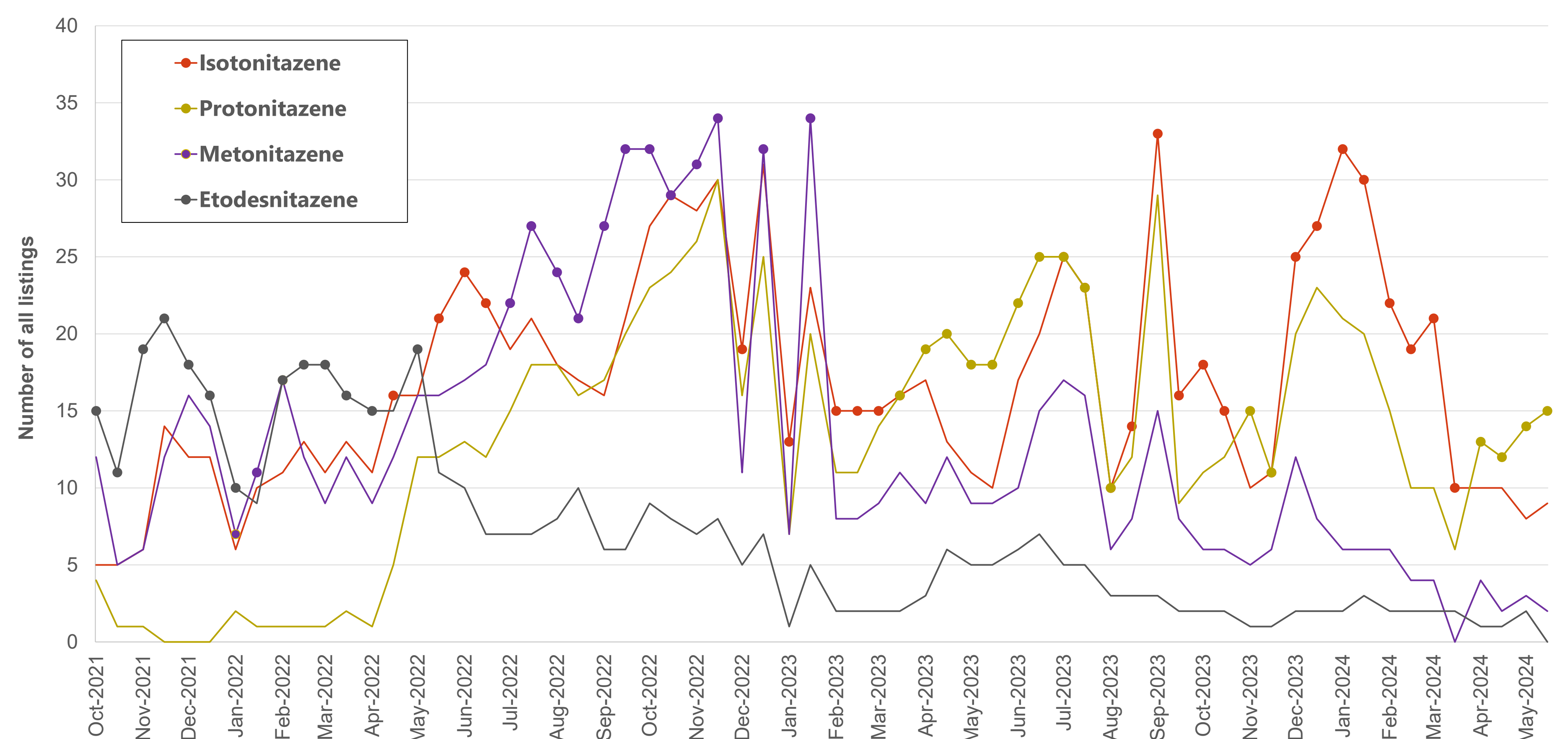


- The number and proportion of nitazene listings gradually increased from October 2021 to the end of 2022, dropped momentarily with the closure of two big cryptomarkets and thereafter gradually increased again as the smaller markets grew in size (Figure 1).
- Three percent (n=142) of the listings had more than one nitazene identified in the listing (Table 1).
- Of those listings with only one nitazene identified (n=4430), the most frequently identified nitazene were isotonitazene, protonitazene, metonitazene and etodesnitazene (also known as etazene).

Table 1. Specific nitazenes identified in cryptomarkets

	Number of cryptomarket listings (%)	
	All	Offer delivery to Australia
1 nitazene identified	4430 (97%)	3508 (97%)
Isotonitazene	1087 (24%)	708 (20%)
Protonitazene	854 (19%)	615 (18%)
Metonitazene	834 (18%)	733 (21%)
Etodesnitazene	447 (10%)	350 (10%)
Other nitazenes	1127 (25%)	1044 (29%)
> 1 nitazene identified	142 (2.9%)	119 (3.2%)
Total	4563 (100%)	3627 (100%)

Figure 2. Trend in the number of specific nitazene listings identified on cryptomarkets



Note: Data points are shown for the specific nitazene with the highest number of listings at that time point.

- From October 2021 to April 2022, etodesnitazene was the most frequently listed nitazene. This was overtaken by metonitazene as the most frequently listed nitazene from around the middle to the end of 2022. From the beginning of 2023, the frequency of metonitazene listings decreased and isotonitazene and protonitazene were the most frequently listed (Figure 2).

Acknowledgements and more information

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