

Tranquillisers

Minor tranquillisers, or benzodiazepines, are nervous system depressants commonly prescribed to treat anxiety or insomnia. This class of prescription drug is highly addictive and should only be used under supervision of a doctor.

Tranquillisers – major and minor

Tranquillisers are legal drugs prescribed by doctors to treat a variety of conditions. There are two broad classes of tranquillisers. 'Major tranquillisers', or antipsychotics, are used to help treat psychosis and illnesses like schizophrenia and bipolar disorder. 'Minor tranquillisers', or benzodiazepines, have a calming, sleep-promoting effect.

Tranquillisers may be prescribed to:

- Treat the symptoms of anxiety disorders
- Relieve insomnia
- Assist in treatment of symptoms experienced by cancer patients
- Control epilepsy
- Assist in relaxing muscles during endoscopy procedures
- Treat psychotic illnesses like schizophrenia and bipolar disorder.

Tranquillisers are also referred to as sedatives.

Recreational use of minor tranquillisers

Some people take minor tranquillisers illegally, as a means of becoming intoxicated. It is important to know that the misleading label of 'minor' is for classification purposes. Contrary to its implications, 'minor' doesn't mean that this family of tranquilliser is weak or low dose.

Some common examples of minor tranquillisers include diazepam (Valium), oxazepam (Serapax), nitrazepam (Mogadon), temazepam (Normison) and flunitrazepam (Rohypnol).

How minor tranquillisers work

Minor tranquillisers are central nervous system depressants, which means they slow down the workings of the brain. They only mask the symptoms of anxiety or insomnia, and don't solve the underlying causes of these conditions.

Minor tranquillisers are highly addictive, whether they are taken under medical supervision or used recreationally. It is generally recommended that they only be used for just days or weeks at a time. Other means of conquering anxiety or insomnia, such as stress management, exercise or relaxation techniques, should be investigated as long-term solutions.

Common effects

The effects of minor tranquillisers depend on the strength of the dose taken, the physiology of the person taking them and their state of mind at the time of taking the drug.

Generally, some of the common effects of minor tranquillisers include:

- Relief from anxiety
- Muscle relaxation
- Sleepiness

- A sense of being disconnected or detached from reality
- Dizziness
- Loss of inhibitions.

Use during pregnancy

Tranquillisers should not be used by pregnant women unless under medical supervision as they may pose a risk to the developing baby.

Store tranquillisers securely

Tranquillisers are highly addictive drugs and should only be used under the supervision of a doctor. Some people may misuse minor tranquillisers as a recreational drug for themselves, or they may give them to other people.

Always store tranquillisers securely and never allow other people to use them.

The symptoms of overdose

In larger doses, minor tranquillisers produce a similar effect to drunkenness. People may lose coordination, slur their speech and have problems with thinking, concentration and memory. Severe mood swings, uncontrollable rages, skin rashes, nausea and problems with sleeping are other common side effects of large doses.

People run the risk of coma or death if they combine minor tranquillisers with other drugs such as alcohol, painkillers, antidepressants, antihistamines, cannabis or heroin.

Dependence, tolerance and withdrawal

Taking minor tranquillisers regularly can not only lead to physical dependence (addiction) but can also lead to psychological dependence where people may feel they need the drug in order to cope with daily life.

After only a short amount of time, a person can develop a tolerance, which means they need to take larger and larger doses to achieve the same effect. Some people experience a drop in effect after only a few days. Over time, the body comes to depend on minor tranquillisers in order to function at its best.

Withdrawal symptoms can be mild to moderate or severe and can include panic attacks, nausea and vomiting, depression, sleep disturbances, tremors, sweating, delirium and paranoia.

It is recommended that a person withdraws from minor tranquilisers slowly over a period of months under medical supervision.

Damage caused by long-term use

Using minor tranquillisers on a regular basis can lead to significant health problems, including:

- Lethargy
- Loss of sex drive
- Increased appetite and weight gain
- Irritability and aggression
- Nausea
- Sleeping difficulties
- Confusion
- Loss of motivation
- Anxiety.

Type of help available

Treatment options for drug dependence include detoxification, individual counselling and group therapy. See your doctor for information and referral, or contact an alcohol and drug service in your area.

Where to get help

- Your doctor
- Alcohol and other drug service
- If an overdose is suspected, call triple zero (000) for an ambulance immediately
- Reconnexion - support and information for tranquilliser dependency Tel. (03) 9866 9400 or 1300 273 266 Mon to Fri 9am to 5pm
- DrugInfo Tel. 1300 85 85 84 – for information
- DirectLine Tel. 1800 888 236 – for 24-hour confidential drug and alcohol telephone counselling, information and referral
- CounsellingOnline – for online counselling and referral

Things to remember

- Minor tranquillisers are nervous system depressants commonly prescribed to treat a number of conditions.
- They are highly addictive and should only be used under medical supervision.
- Withdrawal from use should be gradual and performed under medical supervision.

This page has been produced in consultation with, and approved by:

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