
Benzodiazepines

Summary

- Benzodiazepines 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.
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Benzodiazepines are nervous system depressants commonly prescribed to treat anxiety or insomnia. They are also known as 'minor tranquillisers' and sedatives. ('Major tranquillisers', or antipsychotics, are used to help treat psychosis and illnesses like schizophrenia and bipolar disorder.)

Although they may be referred to as minor tranquillisers, it is important to note that this is for classification purposes, and is not a reference to the effect that benzodiazepines have on the body.

Benzodiazepines are highly addictive and should only be used under supervision of a doctor.

Types of benzodiazepines

Benzodiazepines are prescription medications that are used by doctors to treat a variety of conditions. They have a calming, sleep-promoting effect.

Benzodiazepines may be prescribed to:

- treat the symptoms of anxiety disorders
- relieve insomnia
- help with treatment of symptoms experienced by cancer patients
- control epilepsy
- help in relaxing muscles during endoscopy procedures
- treat psychotic illnesses like schizophrenia and bipolar disorder.

Recreational use of benzodiazepines

Some people take benzodiazepines illegally, as a means of becoming intoxicated.

Some common examples of benzodiazepines include diazepam (Valium), oxazepam (Serapax), nitrazepam (Mogadon), temazepam (Normison) and flunitrazepam (Hypnodorm).

How benzodiazepines work

Benzodiazepines 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.

Benzodiazepines 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.

Effects of benzodiazepines

The effects of benzodiazepines 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 medication.

Some of the common effects of benzodiazepines include:

- relief from anxiety
- muscle relaxation
- sleepiness
- a sense of being disconnected or detached from reality
- dizziness
- loss of inhibitions.

Use of benzodiazepines during pregnancy

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

Store benzodiazepines securely

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

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

Symptoms of benzodiazepines overdose

In larger doses, benzodiazepines 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 benzodiazepines with other drugs such as alcohol, painkillers, antidepressants, antihistamines, cannabis or heroin.

Benzodiazepines – dependence, tolerance and withdrawal

Taking benzodiazepines regularly may 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 may begin to experience tolerance after only a few days. Over time, the body comes to depend on benzodiazepines in order to function at its best.

Withdrawal symptoms vary from person to person and are different depending on the type of benzodiazepine being taken. Symptoms can last from a few weeks to a year and may include:

- headaches
- aching or twitching muscles
- dizziness and tremors
- nausea, vomiting and stomach pains
- bizarre dreams, difficulty sleeping and fatigue
- poor concentration
- anxiety and irritability
- altered perception and heightening of senses
- delusions, hallucinations and paranoia
- seizures.

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

Damage caused by long-term use of benzodiazepines

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

- impaired thinking or memory loss
- anxiety and depression
- irritability, paranoia and aggression
- personality change
- weakness, lethargy and lack of motivation
- drowsiness, sleepiness and fatigue
- difficulty sleeping or disturbing dreams
- headaches
- nausea
- skin rashes and weight gain
- addiction
- withdrawal symptoms.

Treatment for drug dependence

Treatment options for drug dependence may include detoxification, individual counselling and group therapy. See your doctor for information and referral, or contact an alcohol and drug service – call **DrugInfo** on **1300 85 85 84** to find the appropriate referral for you.

Where to get help

- If an overdose is suspected, call triple zero (000) for an ambulance immediately
- Your **GP (doctor)**
- Alcohol and other drug service
- **Reconnexion** – support and information for tranquilliser dependency Tel. **(03) 9809 8200** or **1300 273 266** Mon to Fri 9 am to 5 pm
- **DrugInfo** Tel. **1300 85 85 84** –information and referral services for anyone seeking help for alcohol or drug use
- **DirectLine** Tel. **1800 888 236** – for 24-hour confidential drug and alcohol telephone counselling, information and referral
- Counselling Online – for online counselling and referral
- **Youth Drug and Alcohol Advice (YoDAA)** service Tel. **1800 458 685** – for information, counselling and referral to youth-specific alcohol and other drug services

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