
Benzodiazepines and your mental health

What are Benzodiazepines?

Benzodiazepines are legal drugs prescribed by doctors for a range of reasons, including anxiety, insomnia, withdrawal and some injuries. They are also known as minor tranquilizers, but this does not mean that they are mild or harmless.

Types of Benzodiazepines

Benzodiazepines are often called benzos or sleepers. There are different kinds that vary in strength and how long they last in your body. Each type has two names – the generic drug name and the brand name used by each drug company that manufactures the drug.

Commonly used benzodiazepines include:

- **Temazepam**
(e.g. Normison and Temaze)
- **Diazepam**
(e.g. Valium and Ducene)
- **Oxazepam**
(e.g. Serepax and Murelax)
- **Alprazolam**
(e.g. Xanax and Kalma)
- **Nitrazepam**
(e.g. Mogadon)

How do benzodiazepines affect you?

- In small doses they have a calming effect, while in higher doses they help people to sleep.
- Common effects include; short-term relief from anxiety, muscle relaxation, tiredness, sleep and reduced coordination and impaired judgment.
- Other common effects include; dizziness, fuzzy thinking, poor memory, and uninhibited behaviour (doing things you would not normally do).

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- Although benzodiazepines are often prescribed to provide short-term relief for anxiety, they can increase anxiety in the long term. Depression may also become worse in the long term.
- People using high doses are at greater risk of impulsive behaviour that they may later regret.
- If you have a history of mental health concerns, your symptoms may become worse during withdrawal following longer-term use of benzodiazepines.
- Continual use of benzodiazepines may also reduce your ability to remember important information, which makes it harder to reach your goals.

Benzodiazepines and other drugs

- Using benzodiazepines with any other prescribed, over-the-counter or illicit drug may be dangerous.
- Combining benzodiazepines with other depressants such as alcohol or opiates such as heroin, methadone or morphine can lead to overdose and death.
- Always tell your doctor what drugs you use to make sure you use benzodiazepines safely.

Benzodiazepines and pregnancy

- Benzodiazepines may cause problems during pregnancy, but should never be stopped suddenly.
- Seek medical advice immediately if you become pregnant while using benzodiazepines.

Benzodiazepines use and the law

It is illegal to give your medication to another person, or use someone else's medication.

What happens when you stop using Benzodiazepines?

If you have been using benzodiazepines regularly, you may experience withdrawal symptoms. Physical withdrawal from benzodiazepines may last from a couple of weeks to months, depending on the amount being used and the length of time it has been taken.

The most common withdrawal symptom is difficulty sleeping, which can make life feel more difficult for a period of time.

Other common withdrawal symptoms include:

- Increased anxiety
- Loss of appetite
- Tiredness
- Sweating
- Irritability
- Confusion and hallucinations
- Tremors
- Feelings of unreality or electric shocks
- Headaches
- Convulsions and seizures

It is important to withdraw from benzodiazepines under medical supervision.

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Reducing harm from Benzodiazepines

- Only ever take benzodiazepines as prescribed by your doctor, and do not take more than prescribed.
- Benzodiazepines are best used as short-term medication.
- Try not to use benzodiazepines for more than two weeks of daily use at a time, to reduce your risk of experiencing withdrawal when you stop.
- If you have been on benzodiazepines for a long time, or are on a high dose it is recommended that you cut down gradually, rather than suddenly.
- Seek advice from a doctor or drug and alcohol service before cutting down.
- Do not mix benzodiazepines with other drugs, especially other depressant drugs such as alcohol and opiates, as your risk of overdose and death increases.

What if your friend passes out?

- If the person is unconscious, check their airway is clear, place them on their side and into the recovery position.
- Call an ambulance on 000 and stay with them.
- If breathing has stopped, give mouth-to-mouth resuscitation.
- If there is no pulse, start applying CPR if you are trained.

Conclusion

Long-term use of benzodiazepines can worsen symptoms associated with mental illness.

Useful phone numbers

Emergency **000**

Direct Line **1800 888 236**

Drug Info **1300 858 584**

Moreland Hall (Northern Region) **03 9386 2876**

DAS West (Western Region) **03 8345 6682**

Voyage (Western Region) **03 9296 1228**

Hepatitis C Helpline **03 9349 1111**

Suicide Helpline **1300 651 251**

Smoking Quitline **13 18 48**

Family Drug Help **1300 660 068**

Reconnexion (formally TRANX) **1300 273 266**

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Information contained in this pamphlet is offered for general purposes and should not be considered as substitute advice from your case manager, drug and alcohol worker or doctor.

SUMITT is a Victorian dual diagnosis service, providing direct clinical care, consultation and training on co-occurring substance use and mental illness.

www.dualdiagnosis.mh.org.au

