

# BENZODIAZEPINES

WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW ABOUT SLEEPING PILLS



**Australian Government**  
**Department of Health**

# WHAT ARE BENZODIAZEPINES?

Benzodiazepines are commonly prescribed medications, accounting for around one in every 20 prescriptions written by GPs in Australia.<sup>1</sup> Benzodiazepines are quite often prescribed in a tablet or capsule form that is not intended for injection.

Benzodiazepines are also known as ‘benzos’ and are also a type of sedative. They may also be referred to as sleeping tablets or sleeping pills.

Benzodiazepines are prescribed for a range of problems, including anxiety and insomnia. They have anxiolytic (anxiety-reducing), sedative and muscle relaxant effects. They can also reduce or stop convulsions.

They can be addictive, so are usually prescribed for short-term problems; only for a few weeks usage or for very occasional use. The most well-known is diazepam or Valium.<sup>1,2</sup>

## Examples of benzodiazepines:

Generic Name	Brand Names
diazepam	Valium, Antenex, Ducene, Valpam
alprazolam	Xanax, Kalma, Alprax
clonazepam	Rivotril, Paxam
nitrazepam	Mogadon
oxazepam	Serepax
temazepam	Normison, Euhypnos, Temaze

## WHAT IS STILNOX?

Another drug sometimes prescribed for sleep problems is Stilnox (zolpidem). It isn't strictly a benzodiazepine, but it has similar characteristics. It has received a lot of media attention in recent years due to people having accidents while sleepwalking under the influence. It is also considered to be habit-forming (addictive) and regular use is not recommended.<sup>2</sup>

# WHAT ARE THE EFFECTS?

Benzodiazepines are depressant drugs, meaning that they slow down the central nervous system, or reduce the function of the brain and body. They can cause feelings of relaxation and mild contentment, or even sedation and total blackout. Once swallowed, they usually take about half an hour to take effect. The length of time the effects last for varies.

Effects of benzodiazepines may include:<sup>3, 4</sup>

- **Muscle relaxation**
- **Slow pulse rate**
- **A feeling of calmness**
- **Slow pulse rate**
- **Drowsiness**
- **Shallow breathing**
- **Dizziness**
- **Slurred speech**
- **Blurred vision**
- **Confusion**
- **Loss of balance and coordination**
- **A 'hangover' effect the following day**
- **Blackouts**

# WHAT ARE THE RISKS?

If used as prescribed and recommended, benzodiazepines are very effective medications. However, there are risks, particularly if they're not used properly, or are used regularly (e.g. daily) for more than a few weeks. These include:<sup>1</sup>

- **Dependence (addiction)**
- **Aggression or violence, particularly if the dose is high, the person is quite impulsive, has a history of aggression, or is also under the influence of alcohol**
- **Skin and vein problems (if injected)**
- **Withdrawals (these can lead to seizures and death if not managed correctly - see below)**
- **Blackouts**
- **Overdose (especially if the person also drinks alcohol, takes other depressant drugs such as heroin, or opioid painkillers such as OxyContin or morphine)**

## ARE BENZODIAZEPINES ADDICTIVE?

Benzodiazepine dependence (addiction) can be physical and/or psychological. Signs of physical dependence include tolerance, where over time the person needs more to get the same effect, and withdrawals when use is stopped.<sup>2</sup>

Approximately 4 in every 10 people who take benzodiazepines regularly for more than 6 weeks will experience withdrawal symptoms.<sup>3</sup> These usually start between 2-5 days after the drug is last used and reach a peak at around 7-10 days (the length of time depends on which drug is taken, as some are longer-acting than others).<sup>4</sup> Some people continue to have withdrawal symptoms for several months.<sup>3</sup>

## BENZODIAZEPINES AND WITHDRAWAL

Suddenly stopping benzodiazepine use can result in withdrawal symptoms, some of which are potentially life-threatening. Symptoms usually last around 2–3 weeks but may last longer, depending on the benzodiazepine used.<sup>4</sup> People wishing to stop their benzodiazepine use should talk to a GP about developing a plan to gradually reduce their dose and minimise the risk of withdrawal problems.

Withdrawal symptoms include:<sup>2-4</sup>

- **Feeling anxious, tense or agitated**
- **Panic attacks**
- **Dizziness**
- **Confusion**
- **Abnormal sensations (e.g. the person may have a metallic taste in his/her mouth or feel like the world is moving underneath him/her when it isn't)**
- **Feeling down or depressed**
- **Palpitations**
- **Visual disturbances (e.g. seeing things moving when they're not)**
- **Uncontrollable twitches, muscle spasms or convulsions**
- **Insomnia**
- **Stomach and muscle cramps**
- **Loss of balance**
- **Problems with moving around (akinesia)**
- **Being over-sensitive to light, sound and touch**
- **Short-term memory problems**
- **Overheating and excessive sweating**
- **Symptoms of psychosis, including hallucinations or delusional beliefs (e.g. the person may believe that someone is 'out to get' him/her)**
- **Epileptic fits or seizures (these can be fatal)**

## SOURCES

1. Jones, K., Neilsen, S., Bruno, R., Frei, M. and Lubman, D., 2011. Benzodiazepines: Their role in aggression and why GPs should prescribe with caution. *Australian Family Physician*. 40(11): p. 862-865.
2. MIMS online, 2012. MIMS online accessed 23 August 2012 via UNSW [www.mimsonline.com.au](http://www.mimsonline.com.au).
3. NSW Health, 2008. *Drug and Alcohol Withdrawal Clinical Practice Guidelines - NSW*, Sydney: NSW Health.
4. Timms, P., 2012. *Royal College of Psychiatrists Factsheet on Benzodiazepines*. Last updated March 2012., Royal College of Psychiatrists: London.



## FOR MORE INFORMATION

We have listed some of the national telephone helplines and websites below.

For free and confidential advice about alcohol and other drugs, call the

**National Alcohol and Other Drug Hotline**

**1800 250 015**

It will automatically direct you to the Alcohol and Drug Information Service in your state or territory. These local alcohol and other drug telephone services offer support, information, counselling and referral to services.

### **Australian Drug Foundation**

Provides information about drugs and links to services in each state and territory

**[www.adf.org.au](http://www.adf.org.au)**

### **DrugInfo Line**

Provides information about drugs and alcohol. Open 9am–5pm, Monday to Friday

**1300 85 85 84** or **03 8672 5983**. Or visit **[www.druginfo.adf.org.au](http://www.druginfo.adf.org.au)**

### **Just Ask Us**

Provides information about drugs, alcohol, health and well-being

**[www.justaskus.org.au](http://www.justaskus.org.au)**

### **Kids Helpline**

Free, private and confidential telephone and online counselling service for young people aged 5–25 years Open 24 Hours **1800 55 1800**

### **Lifeline**

24 hour crisis line **131114**

Also available is one-on-one chatlines for crisis support, visit

**[www.lifeline.org.au/Find-Help/Online-Services/crisis-chat](http://www.lifeline.org.au/Find-Help/Online-Services/crisis-chat)**

### **Counselling Online**

Free, confidential counselling service for people using drugs, their families and friends

**[www.counsellingonline.org.au](http://www.counsellingonline.org.au)**

### **National Drugs Campaign**

Australian Government website provides information about illicit drugs and campaign resources.

**[www.australia.gov.au/drugs](http://www.australia.gov.au/drugs)**

### **Family Drug Support**

For families and friends of people who use drugs or alcohol

**1300 368 186**

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