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- Benzodiazepines should be used carefully under close direction of a prescriber.
- Not using benzodiazepines for the right reason or using them for too long can lead to dependence, addiction, severe side effects, or even death.
- Stopping benzodiazepines should be done by slowly lowering the dose over weeks to months with careful direction from a pharmacist or knowledgeable provider to avoid withdrawal symptoms.

## What are Benzodiazepines (BZDs)?

Benzodiazepines are medications that lower the activity of the nerves in the brain and cause you to be drowsy.<sup>1</sup>

## How do they work?

Benzodiazepines work by boosting the effects of gamma-aminobutyric acid (GABA) in the brain.<sup>1</sup> GABA is a chemical that reduces electrical activity in the brain.<sup>1</sup>

## What are they used for?

Benzodiazepines can be used to treat problems such as general anxiety disorder, panic attacks, difficulty sleeping, alcohol withdrawal, and seizures.<sup>1,2,3</sup>

## When should they be used for treatment?

- Benzodiazepines are recommended for short-term relief of symptoms such as anxiety or difficulty sleeping.
- Long-term use must be done under close direction of a health care provider<sup>3</sup>
- These medications should only be used when prescribed for medical treatment.
- Use in people aged 65 and older should be avoided.<sup>4</sup>

## Are these medications safe to use?

- Long-Term Use
  - When used in older people for long-term use this can increase the risk of memory problems, drowsiness, falls, and motor vehicle accidents.<sup>4</sup>
  - Long-term use can lead to tolerance where the body needs higher doses to get the same benefit as when the medication was first started.<sup>2</sup> Long-term use may also lead to physical dependence where symptoms develop when the medication is suddenly stopped.
- Side Effects
  - Severe side effects of this medication are trouble breathing, severe drowsiness, slowed heart rate, low blood pressure, and fainting.<sup>1,2</sup>
  - Some benzodiazepines can last for a long time and build up in the body, which can increase the risk of side effects.<sup>5</sup>
  - Benzodiazepines should be used with caution when taking other medications that cause drowsiness, such as opioid pain medications, as this can lead to overdose, hospitalization, and possibly death.
- Medication Misuse
  - Benzodiazepines can lead to severe mental and physical dependence which increases the risk of developing a substance use disorder.<sup>8</sup>
  - Benzodiazepines caused approximately 12,209 deaths in 2020 in the United States alone due to overdose.<sup>9</sup>

- Other Safety Information
  - There is little evidence that shows benzodiazepines are helpful for managing Post-traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and may even worsen symptoms.
  - Alcohol should NOT be consumed when taking benzodiazepines.
  - The FDA issued a “Boxed Warning” for all benzodiazepines outlining the danger of abuse, misuse, and addiction. The warning also provides concern related to physical dependence with prolonged use. This is the strictest warning that can be issued for a medication.<sup>10</sup>

### What are some examples of benzodiazepines?

- Ativan® (lorazepam)
- Xanax® (alprazolam)
- Klonopin® (clonazepam)
- Librium® (chlordiazepoxide)
- Restoril® (temazepam)
- Valium® (diazepam)
- Halcion® (triazolam)

### What if I am taking a benzodiazepine and want to stop?

If a person has been taking a benzodiazepine for a long time, they can develop physical dependence. When this happens, stopping the medication suddenly can cause withdrawal and you can experience tremors, sweating, upset stomach, vomiting, headaches, muscle pain, heart problems, seizures, and even death.<sup>2</sup> It is recommended to slowly taper off the medication by lowering the dose slowly lowered over weeks to months to reduce the likelihood of withdrawal symptoms.<sup>11</sup>

Stopping benzodiazepines can be complicated and a pharmacist should be consulted along with your prescribing clinician to help develop a plan.



Go online to find more information about benzodiazepines and to view the references for this toolkit.

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