

Benzodiazepines

This factsheet gives information about benzodiazepine medication. Your doctor may prescribe benzodiazepines if you have severe anxiety or if you are very distressed.



KEY POINTS

- Benzodiazepines are a type of medication that is used to treat anxiety.
- You may get side effects from taking this kind of medication. If you are worried about any side effects, you should see your doctor.
- You can become addicted to benzodiazepines. You should not take them for longer than one month.
- You may get withdrawal symptoms when you stop taking benzodiazepines. You should talk to your doctor before you stop taking them. Your doctor may gradually take you off your medication if you have been taking them for a long time.

This factsheet covers:

1. [What are benzodiazepines?](#)
2. [Are there different types of benzodiazepines?](#)
3. [Are there any side effects?](#)
4. [What if I want to stop taking benzodiazepines?](#)
5. [Do benzodiazepines affect other medication?](#)
6. [Does alcohol affect my benzodiazepines?](#)
7. [Can I drive when taking benzodiazepines?](#)
8. [What else should I consider before taking benzodiazepines?](#)

1. What are benzodiazepines?

Benzodiazepines are a type of sedative and are usually a short-term treatment.¹

Your doctor may offer you benzodiazepines if you have an anxiety disorder that causes you a lot of distress, or difficulty sleeping.² You should not take benzodiazepines for longer than one month. If you take them for longer, you can become addicted to them. This means you need more to have the same effect and could have withdrawal effects when you stop taking them.³

2. Are there different types of benzodiazepines?

There are two different types of benzodiazepines. There are shorter acting benzodiazepines called hypnotics used for treating sleep problems such as insomnia.⁴ And longer acting benzodiazepines called anxiolytics used for treating anxiety.⁵

You should only be prescribed benzodiazepines for the shortest amount of time possible.⁶ Below is a table of benzodiazepines and their trade names.⁷

Hypnotic Benzodiazepines		
Medicine name	Trade name	Use to treat
Flurazepam	Dalmane	Sleep problems
Loprazolam		Sleep problems
Lormetazepam		Sleep problems
Nitrazepam	Mogadon	Sleep problems
Temazepam		Sleep problems
Anxiolytic Benzodiazepines		
Medicine name	Trade name	Use to treat
Alprazolam	Xanax	Anxiety disorders
Chlordiazepoxide Hydrochloride	Librium	Anxiety disorders, alcohol withdrawal
Diazepam	Rimapan, Tensium, Dialar, Diazemuls	Anxiety disorders, alcohol withdrawal, muscle spasms
Lorazepam	Ativan	Anxiety disorders
Oxazepam		Anxiety disorders, alcohol withdrawal

These drugs can come as tablets, capsules and liquids. If you are using a liquid benzodiazepine, remember to shake the bottle first. This is because the drug can settle at the bottom.⁸

You can find more information about:

- Anxiety Disorders, and
- Talking Therapies

at www.rethink.org. Or call 0121 522 7007 and ask us to send you a copy.

[Top](#)

3. Are there any side effects?⁹

Some people can get side effects from taking benzodiazepines.

Common side effects are:

- drowsiness or sleepiness, and
- dizziness.

A less common side effect is called 'ataxia'. This means being unsteady on your feet.

Rare side effects include:

- headache,
- confusion,
- low blood pressure such as feeling dizzy when standing up,
- problems with remembering things,
- feeling aggressive,
- feeling excitable and talkative,
- feeling unfriendly, and
- feeling impulsive, this means you might do things that you normally would not do.

If you get a blotchy rash, you should stop taking your benzodiazepines and see your doctor immediately.¹⁰

Not everyone will get side effects from taking benzodiazepines. Talk to your doctor if you are worried about any side effects.

Taking benzodiazepines for long periods can lead to addiction. Doctors recommend that you only take them for 2-4 weeks.¹¹

[Top](#)

4. What if I want to stop taking benzodiazepines?

If you have been taking benzodiazepines regularly for more than 4-6 weeks you should talk to your doctor about stopping. They will be able to help you stop taking them. It is safer to reduce the medication slowly. This is because your body will be used to the medication and you might experience withdrawal symptoms.¹²

These are some common physical side effects of withdrawal.¹³

- Stiffness
- Weakness
- Stomach problems
- Flu-like symptoms
- Visual problems

These are some common psychological side effects of withdrawal.¹⁴

- Anxiety
- Insomnia
- Nightmares
- Problems with memory and concentration
- Depression
- Experiencing things that are not there, called hallucinations
- Having beliefs that don't match reality, called delusions

Side effects from withdrawal will usually stop after a few weeks.¹⁵ For some people they can last longer. You will not always get withdrawal side effects when stopping benzodiazepine medication.

You should talk to your doctor or local pharmacist if you are worried about how long you have been taking benzodiazepines. You can talk to them about any side effects from withdrawal you are having.

[Top](#)

5. Do benzodiazepines affect other medication?

You should always tell your doctor about all of the medicines you are taking before you start or stop any new ones. You should tell them about any supplements or herbal medicines you take. This is because medication might not go with something you're already taking.

Benzodiazepines can cause tiredness or sleepiness. Other medication can make this worse, such as:¹⁶

- some painkillers,
- antidepressants,
- antipsychotic medication,
- herbal sleeping tablets,
- antihistamines, and
- beta-blockers.

[Top](#)

6. Does alcohol affect my benzodiazepines?

If you drink alcohol while taking benzodiazepines it can make you feel very sleepy. It could also cause increased hostility and aggression.¹⁷ So it is best to avoid alcohol when taking benzodiazepines.¹⁸

7. Can I drive when taking benzodiazepines?

Taking benzodiazepines can affect the way you drive. For example, if your benzodiazepine makes you feel drowsy then you should not drive. You might feel drowsy the day after you take them. The medication can affect how quickly you can react to things that happen when you drive.¹⁹ You should not drive until these effects wear off.

You should tell the DVLA if you are taking medication that may affect your driving. You should also tell them if you have a medical condition that could affect your driving.

You can find more about '**Driving and mental illness**' at www.rethink.org. Or call 0121 522 7007 and ask us to send you a copy.

8. What else should I consider before taking benzodiazepines?

Sex

Benzodiazepines do not have any known effects on sexual performance. But drowsiness might have an impact on some people's sex lives.²⁰

Pregnancy²¹

There is no evidence to say that taking benzodiazepines before pregnancy will have any negative effect.

If benzodiazepines are taken during pregnancy, this can affect the baby when it is born. The baby can get "withdrawal symptoms", sometimes called floppy baby syndrome. The baby can have some breathing problems and low body temperature.²²

Make sure you tell the midwife and other healthcare professionals if you've been taking benzodiazepines recently. You could think about reducing your dose before your due date.

Breastfeeding

When you take medication it will be in your breast milk. If you take these medications you should not breastfeed or stop taking while you are breastfeeding.²³



Battle Against Tranquillisers

This is a user-led charity based in Bristol which aims to help anyone affected by addiction to benzodiazepines, tranquilisers, sleeping tablets and any other drugs which have similar effects.

Telephone: 0117 9663629

Address: Coniston Community Centre, Coniston Rd, Patchway, South Gloucestershire, BS34 5LP

Email: support@bataid.org

Website: <http://bataid.org/>

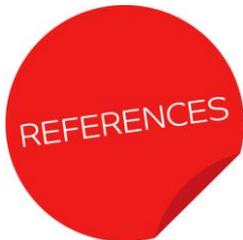
Bristol and District Tranquiliser Project

This organisation gives support and advice to people who are addicted to prescribed tranquilisers, antidepressants and sleeping tablets.

Telephone: 0117 9500020 (10am – 3pm Monday – Thursday).

Address: Suite 5A Westbury Court, Church Road, Westbury-on-Trym, Bristol, BS9 3EF.

Website: www.btpinfo.org.uk



¹ Joint Formulary Committee. *British National Formulary 69*. London: Pharmaceutical Press; 2015. Para 225 s.4.1.

² Taylor, D. Paton, C. & Kapur, S. *The Maudsley Prescribing Guidelines in Psychiatry* 12th edition. Great Britain: Wiley Blackwell; 2015. Page 343

³ Choice and Medication. *Benzodiazepines*.

www.choiceandmedication.org/nsft/class/1/ [Accessed 3rd August 2016]

⁴ As note 1, page 226. S.4.1.1.

⁵ As note 2, page 343.

⁶ As note 1, page 225, para.4.1.

⁷ As note 1, pages 225-234.

⁸ As note 3. [Accessed 3rd August 2016].

⁹ As note 3, [Accessed 3rd August 2016].

¹⁰ As note 3. [Accessed 3rd August 2016].

¹¹ As note 1, page 226 s.4.1.

¹² As note 2, page 346.

¹³ As note 2, page 346.

¹⁴ As note 2, page 346.

¹⁵ As note 2, page 346.

¹⁶ As note 3. [Accessed 3rd August 2016].

¹⁷ As note 2, page 350.

¹⁸ As note 3. [Accessed 3rd August 2016].

¹⁹ As note 1, page 225.

²⁰ As note 3 [Accessed 3rd August 2016].

²¹ As note 1, page 227. S.4.1.1.

²² As note 3 [Accessed 3rd August 2016].

²³ As note 1, page 227.

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Rethink Mental Illness Advice Service

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We're open 9:30am to 4pm
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