

# Risks associated with benzodiazepines

Benzodiazepines (benzos) are a group of depressant drugs that reduce activity in the brain, resulting in a calming effect. They are usually prescribed for a short time to relieve anxiety and to help people sleep and come in pills or capsules. The three types of benzodiazepines are: short, intermediate and long acting. When used correctly, benzodiazepines are relatively safe. However, there are risks associated with their use.

## Common types

- > Alprazolam (Xanax, Kalma) - (Short-acting)
- > Oxazepam (Serepax, Alepam, Murelax) - (Short-acting)
- > Temazepam (Normison, Temaze, Temtabs, Euhypnos) - (Short-acting)
- > Flunitrazepam (Hypnodorm) - (Intermediate-acting)
- > Nitrazepam (Mogadon, Alodorm) - (Intermediate-acting)
- > Clonazepam (Rivotril, Paxam) - (Intermediate-acting)
- > Lorazepam (Ativan) - (Intermediate-acting for oral tablet)
- > Diazepam (Valium, Antenex, Ducene, Ranzepan, Valpam) - (Long-acting).

## Effects

### Duration

Noticeable effects usually wear off within a few hours, but as long as the drugs are present in the body, they continue to have subtle effects.

### Short-term

- > lethargy, drowsiness, fatigue
- > memory loss
- > impaired motor coordination (muscle movement), thinking and memory
- > staggering, blurred vision, vertigo
- > slurred speech
- > nightmares
- > altered mood (depression or euphoria)
- > confusion
- > skin sensitivity (rashes)
- > diarrhea or constipation
- > drug interactions (eg alcohol, opioids) can result in slowed breathing rates, which can restrict oxygen to the body and can lead to death
- > uncharacteristic behaviour (high doses).

### Long-term

- > lethargy, sleepiness and lack of motivation
- > unable to feel normal highs and lows or to grieve
- > depression, feeling irritable
- > memory loss
- > muscle weakness
- > headaches, nausea, weight gain
- > menstrual irregularities, engorged breasts, reduced libido
- > dependence (addiction).

## Tolerance and dependence

Tolerance to the effects of benzodiazepines develops quickly especially those that are short acting such as alprazolam. This means people who use the drug need more of it to achieve the same effect.

People who use benzodiazepines can develop dependence after only three to six weeks at prescribed doses. Dependence means that using benzodiazepines becomes central to a person's life and a lot of time may be spent thinking about, obtaining and using them. This can mean they have difficulty controlling use or stopping despite experiencing problems.

## Withdrawal

If someone who is dependent on benzodiazepines stops taking them abruptly, they can experience withdrawal symptoms, which could last 1-2 weeks for most people. Gradual reduction in consultation with a doctor is recommended.

Withdrawal symptoms can be divided into three main groups:

Anxiety and related symptoms:

- > anxiety, panic attacks, over breathing, tremor
- > disturbed sleep, muscle spasms, loss of appetite
- > visual disturbance, sweating
- > mood changes.

Perceptual changes:

- > overly sensitive to noise
- > abnormal sensations
- > dizziness
- > feelings of unreality.

Major events:

- > seizures
- > confusion, hallucinations, paranoia.

## Reducing the risk

- > Using smaller amounts less often reduces the risk of developing dependence. Avoid regular use.
- > Avoid using other drugs particularly other depressants such as alcohol or opioids.
- > Injecting benzodiazepines can be dangerous as the pills do not dissolve well and can block blood vessels if injected causing scarring and bruising, and may lead to blood clots or the loss of a limb. There is also the risk of infections and blood borne virus transmission such as hepatitis C, hepatitis B and HIV.
- > If injecting always use clean injecting equipment, use a clean pill filter and dispose of all equipment safely. There are Clean Needle Programs throughout South Australia where sterile injecting equipment, health information and referrals can be accessed for free.
- > Visit [www.sahealth.sa.gov.au/dassa](http://www.sahealth.sa.gov.au/dassa) for more information.

## Benzodiazepines and driving

Under the section 47 of the *Road Traffic Act 1961*, it is an offence to drive or attempt to drive a motor vehicle under the influence of a drug. Drugs in your system can make driving extremely dangerous because they impair coordination, reduce reaction time, and affect your vision and ability to judge distance and speed.

In the case of benzodiazepines, this information relates to those people who are impaired by the drug.

## Further information

Risks of using drugs - visit [www.sahealth.sa.gov.au](http://www.sahealth.sa.gov.au) > Healthy Living > Is your health at risk? > The risks of using drugs.

Phone the Alcohol and Drug Information Service (ADIS) on 1300 13 1340 between 8.30am and 10pm for confidential telephone counselling, information and referral.

## For more information

### Alcohol and Drug Information Service (ADIS)

Phone: 1300 13 1340

Confidential telephone counselling and information available between 8.30am and 10pm every day.

[www.sahealth.sa.gov.au/dassa](http://www.sahealth.sa.gov.au/dassa)

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