

Benzodiazepines for Anxiety

Treating Anxiety

Benzodiazepines are a group of drugs that may be used as a short term measure to treat severe anxiety eg during crises and include diazepam, lorazepam, oxazepam and chlordiazepoxide.

They should not be used to relieve mild nervousness or tension caused by daily stress, to treat panic attacks or for more than 4 weeks.

Treatment for anxiety and panic attacks should include psychological therapy and if drugs are needed antidepressants are often used.

Why are Doctors reluctant to prescribe benzodiazepines for anxiety?

Benzodiazepines may cause significant problems, which include:

- ◆ Falls – people taking benzodiazepines have an increased risk of falling and bone fractures such as hip fracture.
- ◆ Accidents – people taking benzodiazepines are at a significantly increased risk of car accidents.
- ◆ Memory and mood problems – such as confusion forgetfulness, aggression and depression.
- ◆ Addiction and dependence – feeling like you need the medicine to carry out day to day activities and/or withdrawal symptoms if you stop or reduce the tablets.
- ◆ Withdrawal – symptoms can include anxiety, irritability, difficulty sleeping, sweating, gastrointestinal symptoms. These are usually mild and only last for days to a few weeks.
- ◆ Dementia – there may be an increased risk of developing dementia and Alzheimer’s disease in people taking benzodiazepines for more than 3 months.
- ◆ Death - people taking benzodiazepine have a significantly increased risk of death compared to people who do not take these medicines.

What is the alternative to benzodiazepines?

Your doctor or nurse will give you advice on how to tackle anxiety without using benzodiazepines. Advice includes finding time to relax, developing a relaxation routine, more exercise and using relaxation techniques.

If your symptoms are more severe your doctor will discuss psychological therapy and may consider drug treatment.



Advice if a benzodiazepine is prescribed

- ◆ Benzodiazepine prescriptions will usually only last a short period (a couple of weeks). Please **do not** ask for more, or for it to be added to your repeat prescription.
- ◆ If you feel drowsy the next day, do not drive or operate machinery.
- ◆ Avoid alcohol.
- ◆ Never give your tablets to anyone else and always keep them in a safe place.

Benzodiazepines and driving

Benzodiazepines can make you sleepy. When this happens do not drive or use tools or machinery.

A significant number of drivers (25%) involved in road traffic accidents have impaired driving skills because of alcohol, drugs or illness. If the police believe your driving is impaired due to taking benzodiazepines they can do a blood or urine test and you could be charged with driving under the influence of drugs even if this medicine is prescribed.



For more information see this website:

<https://www.gov.uk/drug-driving-law>

Benzodiazepines and pain killers

Use of benzodiazepines and opioid pain killers such as codeine, tramadol and morphine increases the risk of drowsiness, difficulties in breathing (respiratory depression), coma and may be life-threatening. If you are taking this combination it could be helpful to inform friends or relatives to be aware of these signs and symptoms. If you experience these symptoms you should seek medical attention immediately. If you are prescribed this combination you should make an appointment to discuss this with your doctor.

Some pain killers which you can buy from Pharmacies include codeine and you should avoid using these medicines if you are taking benzodiazepines.

What if you have been taking benzodiazepines regularly for some time?

- ◆ As a rule, you should consider reducing or stopping them **with** advice from your doctor
- ◆ Do it gradually; cut down the dose a little at a time.
- ◆ Pick a good time to do it; it is best to wait until any life crises have passed and your stress levels are as low as possible. Consider stopping the tablets whilst on holiday, or when you have less pressure from work, etc.
- ◆ Anticipate and accept that you are likely to have a period of increased anxiety when reducing these tablets. However, most people who reduce or stop benzodiazepines say they feel much better mentally and physically.
- ◆ Check with your doctor or pharmacist whether any other medicines you are taking are likely to cause anxiety problems.
- ◆ Use the 'Good relaxation guide'; copies are available from your GP practice.

IMPORTANT: Do not stop benzodiazepine medication suddenly, as this may cause problems. You should discuss this with your doctor first.

Adapted from All Wales Medicines Strategy Group: Hypnotic and Anxiolytic reduction or withdrawal resources by Wigan Borough CCG, with permission and thanks.