

Benzodiazepines And Sleeping Pills

Introduction

Benzodiazepines are a type of medication prescribed by doctors for its therapeutic actions in various conditions such as stress and anxiety; sleeping problems; muscle tension; as an anaesthetic before surgery as well as treatment for epilepsy and alcohol withdrawal. They are also known as “minor tranquillisers” but this does not mean that they are mild or harmless.

There are different kinds of “benzos” that vary in strength and the duration of its effect in the body. They go by either the generic drug name or the brand name used by each drug company. Commonly used benzodiazepines include:

- diazepam (e.g. Valium)
- alprazolam (e.g. Xanax)
- midazolam (e.g. Dormicum)
- nitrazepam (e.g. Mogadon)
- lorazepam (e.g. Ativan)
- bromazepam (e.g. Lexotan)
- clonazepam (e.g. Rivotril)

Besides benzodiazepines, there are other types of sleeping pills such as:

- zopiclone (e.g. Imovane)
- zolpidem (e.g. Stilnox)

Some people use benzodiazepines illegally or at excessive doses for non-medical purposes to feel “high”. Some drug addicts turn to them when they cannot obtain heroin or to increase the effect of heroin. Those that use stimulants such as ecstasy may use benzodiazepines to help when they are “coming down”.

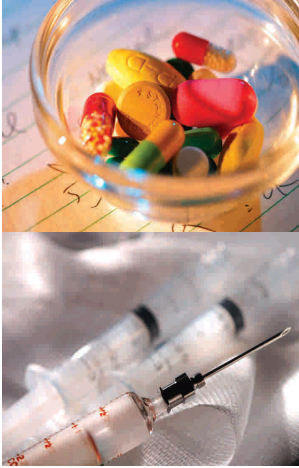


Benzodiazepines depress or slow down the central nervous system and can induce relaxation and calmness in the short term. However they do not cure anxiety or mood disorders; neither do they solve the problems that caused these conditions in the first place. They also have a wide range of unwanted side effects, especially when misused.

Side effects of benzodiazepines and sleeping pills

At lower doses, the immediate effects include mild impairment of thought processes, memory and motor coordination; drowsiness; tiredness and lethargy; dizziness; blurred vision. There may also be dry mouth, tremors, nausea and vomiting, loss of appetite, constipation or diarrhoea. Feelings of euphoria and sometimes of emotional isolation and depression can occur.

At higher doses there may be over-sedation, with an effect similar to that of alcohol – disinhibition (doing things you normally would not do), confusion, slurred speech, poor coordination, double vision, impaired judgment, difficulty thinking clearly, mood swings, impulsive and aggressive behaviour. The unwanted negative effect of reduced coordination makes it dangerous to drive or operate machinery.



In combination with alcohol or other illegal drugs, there is a high risk of drug interaction, overdose and death. This is because very high doses of benzodiazepines can cause respiratory depression, unconsciousness or coma. Injecting them can be very dangerous and result in serious medical complications such as collapsed veins, infected skin, amputation of limbs due to poor circulation, damage to organs, stroke and even death. There is a risk of

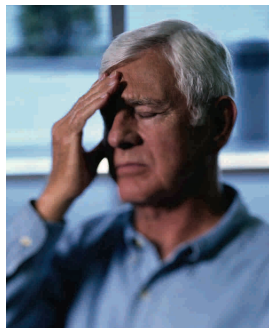
contracting diseases such as hepatitis B, hepatitis C and HIV, if needles and syringes are shared.

Benzodiazepines are known to adversely affect the baby's development in the womb if a mother consumes them during pregnancy, leading to physical defects. They can be passed from mother to baby through breast milk and have sedative effects, as the baby's body is unable to process them quickly.

Long term effects of excessive usage include muscle weakness, skin rashes, weight gain, increased risk of accidents, increased risk of falling over (especially in older people), sexual problems, menstrual irregularities, headaches, difficulty sleeping and nightmares, fatigue and lack of motivation, personality changes, anxiety, irritability, paranoia and depression.

How does a person know he or she has a problem with the use of benzodiazepines or sleeping pills?

One sign is that work or studies is affected e.g. mistakes made at work or in school and lateness or absenteeism because of unwanted effects. Other negative effects that are seen include damage to family or social life, finances, physical and emotional health as well as trouble with the law e.g. rash driving after taking benzodiazepines.

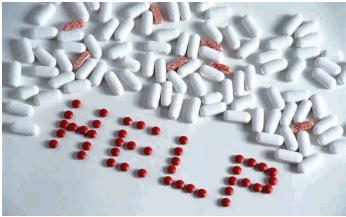


Some people may start to consume more so as to achieve the same effect the benzodiazepines had on them at an earlier stage. They may not be able to control their usage, even when they wish to. For these people, stopping suddenly can lead to withdrawal symptoms. They may also have craving and urges, which are difficult to resist.

Withdrawal symptoms can be mild in some people but severe in others. These unpleasant sensations eventually disappear as the body adjusts to functioning without the benzodiazepines. These symptoms commonly include headaches; muscle ache or twitching; numbness; tingling sensations; tremor; faintness; sweating; nausea, vomiting and abdominal pains; bizarre dreams; insomnia; fatigue; poor concentration and memory; feeling tense and irritable; altered perception and heightening of senses (such as hypersensitivity to noise, light and touch).

If severe, there can be confusion, hallucinations, seizures and paranoia. This is more likely to happen if you stop the medication abruptly after long term use of high doses.

What is the treatment for excessive use of these medications?



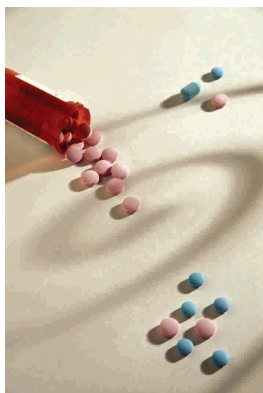
The first step is to admit that you may have a problem. Try to understand what motivates you to change your habit of using benzodiazepines excessively.

It is important not to suddenly stop taking them without first seeing a doctor. A visit to your doctor can be useful for support and advice. This is because benzodiazepines have different potency and speed of elimination. Your doctor can also carry out a health assessment for you and discuss a medically supervised withdrawal plan with you. It may include switching over to a longer-acting benzodiazepine over a period of time before finally tapering off. A slow reduction in dose over time (by about 10% per week) is recommended to reduce the severity of the withdrawal symptoms.

If anxiety or insomnia recurs, this may be part of withdrawal and not re-emergence of the underlying anxiety or sleep disorder. These withdrawal symptoms will eventually go away.

It is helpful to consult a substance abuse counsellor or to attend regular group support meetings. Remember, there are many ways to deal with anxiety and insomnia without using benzodiazepines, such as relaxation, stress management, counselling, a healthy diet and exercise. The risk of relapse is less with ongoing participation in counselling or support groups. Consult your doctor if you have persistent anxiety or depression, to find out if you are suffering from an anxiety or mood disorder that requires further treatment.

Tips on how to reduce harm from benzodiazepines or sleeping pills



- Take only those prescribed by your doctor and do not take more than prescribed.
 - Benzodiazepines should be used as short term medication for medical reasons only.
 - Avoid using them on a daily basis for more than two weeks at a time.
 - Always seek medical advice before cutting down.
 - Do not mix benzodiazepines with other drugs, especially depressants such as alcohol and opiates (including heroin).
- Seek medical advice immediately if you become pregnant while using benzodiazepines.

If you (or a friend) have a problem with benzodiazepine use, please contact:

1. Addiction Medicine Clinic, Changi General Hospital
(For treatment of alcohol, benzodiazepine and gambling addiction only)
2 Simei Street 3
Singapore 529889
Consultation by appointment only. Please call: 6850 3333.
2. Community Addictions Management Programme (CAMP),
Institute of Mental Health
10 Buangkok View
Singapore 539747
Consultation by appointment only. Please call: 6389 2200.
3. Recovery Support Group Meetings
WE Centre for Addictions Recovery and Education
620 Tiong Bahru Road
Singapore 158789
For enquiries, please call 6471 5346 (answering machine).
Email: admin@wecare.org.sg

For appointments and enquiries,
please call CGH Appointment Centre at
Tel: (65) 6850 3333

CGH Appointment Centre operating hours:

8.30 am to 8.00 pm (Monday to Friday)
8.30am to 12.30 pm (Saturday & Sunday)
Closed on Public Holidays

For more information, please visit
<http://www.cgh.com.sg>



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