

Withdrawal

Withdrawal from benzos can be dangerous, and should never be attempted suddenly. If possible withdrawal from benzodiazepine should begin when there is some degree of stability in a person's life. Serious complications such as fits or hallucinations may occur if a person has been using benzos for more than 2-3 weeks. Users need to gradually reduce their dose under the supervision of a doctor, pharmacist or health worker. Withdrawal symptoms can include: sleeping problems, tension, muscle pain, pain attacks, depression, sensory disturbances, fits, hallucinations, sweating, anxiety and tremors.

Detox and treatment

Phone ADIS for details of services providing benzo detox and support programs see **FACT SHEET No.1 Contacts**. Your local health service will also be able to advise of local services.

Benzodiazepines are extremely difficult drugs to withdraw from and to stay away from. It takes many people several attempts before they are successful. Each attempt should be looked upon as learning process, and that it is possible to try and start again.

Trying to work out what triggers the desire to use the benzodiazepines in the first place and developing coping ideas and strategies can help. Keeping a diary may be useful to help identify triggers. Learning new ways to cope with stress, insomnia and anxiety with the support of a drug counsellor, psychologist or supportive rehab centre can be extremely helpful during treatment and afterwards.

Contacts

For more information contact 1300 368 186

Family Drug Support

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Benzodiazepines

Common Names

Benzodiazepines is the name of the group of drugs commonly known as benzos, minor tranquillisers, pills or sleepers.

Each drug has a chemical "generic" name and at least one "brand name". Brand names are the same drug made by different companies. some of the more common brand names are:

Diazepam (Antenax, Ducene, Valium)

Oxazepam (Alepam, Murelax, Serepax)

Nitrazepam (Alodorm, Mogodon)

Clonazepam (Rivotril)

Tamazepam

Flunitrazepam (Hypnodorm. Rohypnol now unavailable)



The generic name is always printed on the manufacturer's label.

History of the drug

Benzodiazepines are restricted substances under the NSW Poisons Act. Illegal use, possession or supply carries a heavy fine or imprisonment. Doctors treat anxiety and sleep problems by prescribing benzodiazepines. They can also be used to treat panic disorders and muscle spasms, and are occasionally used in the treatment of epilepsy. Benzodiazepines only treat the symptoms of these disorders, not the cause.

Under strict medical supervision, they may also be used to assist in alcohol withdrawal. Heroin, speed and ecstasy drug users tend to use benzos to help them sleep or when they are trying to withdraw or quit taking their drug. It is useful to know the generic name of these drugs, as some people will say they have stopped taking the drug when they have merely swapped to a different brand. Some people use benzos as their 'drug of choice'.

Forms of the drug

Benzodiazepines come in tablet form and should be taken orally. Some users inject benzos, which is highly problematic and potentially dangerous. Some benzos are toxic to veins once injected.

Drug effects

Benzodiazepines affect the central nervous system. Like alcohol and heroin, they are depressants and slow down responses such as respiration, heart rate and mental and emotional responses.

Short term physical effects include:

- Relaxation and drowsiness
- Dizziness
- Confusion and mood swings
- Aggression
- Slurred speech
- Amnesia (loss of short term memory)

Almost half the benzo users in a study conducted by the National Drug and Alcohol Research Centre reported having committed some form of property crime while under the influence of these pills.

Risks and harms

If a person is depressed, or has a family history of depression, benzos carry a high risk of triggering a depressive episode, and are a common method of suicide. Alcohol and benzos are also a dangerous combination as the depressant effect of each is magnified. For those already feeling down or experiencing life problems, this combination intensifies and magnifies negative feelings and thoughts, increasing the risk of suicide or self harming behaviour.

Long term physical effects include:

- Collapsed veins
- Cellulitis (red, swollen, infected skin)
- Poor circulation which can lead to amputation of limbs
- Organ damage
- Stroke
- Thrombosis
- Endocarditis (heart infection)

Dependency

Regular use of benzodiazepines is highly likely to produce physical and psychological dependence within about 4-6 weeks. For this reason, Doctors should only usually prescribe them for very short periods of time, and monitor their use very closely. Tolerance increases quickly for example, after 3 nights with sleeping tablets. Users may quickly find themselves taking larger doses.

Danger signs

Heroin and benzodiazepines can be a lethal combination. One in every four 'heroin related deaths' have involved combined use of these drugs. With benzos in a person's system, less heroin is needed to overdose. After 'a binge on benzos' which can remain in the system for up to 24 hours, heroin use becomes very risky during this period. It's common to hear that walking a person around, putting them under a shower, making them vomit, giving them tea or coffee, will reverse an overdose or 'bring them around'. These are myths - and could all be dangerous. Don't waste time that should be used calling an ambulance and starting CPR.

Call an ambulance immediately if:

- You are unable to wake someone up: A common myth is that a person is 'sleeping it off' THIS IS NOT TRUE. If they don't respond to shaking and calling their name then they are in danger
- You hear gurgling or choking sounds as they are breathing
- They have cold clammy skin or are sweating profusely
- Their eyes are open, but they're like 'doll's eyes' – staring or vacant
- They have passed out or become unable to speak or move. If they are still breathing and have a pulse - lie them on their side while waiting for the ambulance
- No pulse and they are not breathing, commence CPR (Cardio-Pulmonary Resuscitation) immediately and wait for the ambulance
- A pulse but NO BREATHING, commence mouth-to-mouth resuscitation ONLY

Overdose is quite possible with benzodiazepines and symptoms are similar to heroin overdose. Overdose risk is severely increased when benzos are combined with heroin or alcohol. The blood pressure drops so low that oxygen does not get to vital organs, the body shuts down, and breathing slows and stops.