

Benzodiazepines

Please note: The information given on this page is not medical advice and should not be relied on in this way. Individuals wanting medical advice on this issue should consult a health professional.

What are benzodiazepines?

Benzodiazepines (pronounced ben-zoh-die-AZ-a-peens) are depressant drugs. This means that they slow down the activity of the central nervous system and the messages travelling between the brain and the body. They do not necessarily make a person feel depressed. Other depressants include alcohol, cannabis and heroin.

Benzodiazepines, also known as minor tranquillisers, are most commonly prescribed by doctors to relieve stress and anxiety and to help people sleep. However, there is increasing concern among medical professionals about the risks of using these drugs, particularly when they are used for a long time.

Some people use benzodiazepines illegally to become intoxicated or to help with the 'come down' effects of stimulants such as amphetamines or cocaine.

Types of benzodiazepines

There are three types of benzodiazepines: long, intermediate and short acting. Short-acting benzodiazepines have stronger withdrawal or 'come down' effects and can be more addictive than long-acting ones.

Pharmaceutical names

Benzodiazepines are known by their chemical (generic) name or their brand name. In each case the drug is exactly the same—it's just made by a different company. Some common benzodiazepines are:

Generic name	Brand name	Type of benzodiazepine
diazepam	Ducene [®] , Valium [®]	Long-acting
oxazepam	Alepam [®] , Murelax [®] , Serepax [®]	Short-acting
nitrazepam	Alodorm [®] , Mogadon [®]	Intermediate-acting
temazepam	Euhypnos [®] , Normison [®]	Short-acting
alprazolam	Xanax [®] , Kalma [®] , Alprax [®]	Short-acting

Benzodiazepines are most commonly prescribed by doctors to relieve stress and anxiety and to help people sleep.

Adapted from: Brands B, Sproule B & Marshman J. (eds) (1998) *Drugs & Drug Abuse* (3rd ed.) Ontario: Addiction Research Foundation.

Slang names

Benzos, tranx, sleepers, downers, pills, xannies, serras (Serepax[®]), moggies (Mogadon[®]), normies (Normison[®])

How are they used?

Benzodiazepines are usually swallowed. Some people also inject them.

Effects of benzodiazepines

There is no safe level of drug use. Use of any drug always carries some risk. It's important to be careful when taking any type of drug.

Benzodiazepines affect everyone differently, but the effects may include:

- Depression
- Confusion
- Feelings of isolation or euphoria
- Impaired thinking and memory loss
- Headache
- Drowsiness, sleepiness and fatigue
- Dry mouth
- Slurred speech or stuttering
- Double or blurred vision
- Impaired coordination, dizziness and tremors
- Nausea and loss of appetite
- Diarrhoea or constipation

If a large amount is taken, the following may also be experienced:

- Over-sedation or sleep
- Jitteriness and excitability
- Mood swings and aggression
- Slow, shallow breathing

- Unconsciousness or coma
- Death (more likely when taken with another drug such as alcohol)

Injecting benzodiazepines may also cause:

- Vein damage and scarring
- Infection, including hepatitis B, hepatitis C, HIV and AIDS
- Deep vein thrombosis and clots causing loss of limbs, damage to organs, stroke and possibly death

Injecting drugs repeatedly and sharing injecting equipment with other people increases the risk of experiencing these effects.

Long-term effects

Regular use of benzodiazepines may cause:

- Impaired thinking or memory loss
- Anxiety and depression
- Irritability, paranoia and aggression
- Personality change
- Weakness, lethargy and lack of motivation
- Drowsiness, sleepiness and fatigue
- Difficulty sleeping or disturbing dreams
- Headaches
- Nausea
- Skin rashes and weight gain
- Addiction
- Withdrawal symptoms (see below)

Using benzodiazepines with other drugs

The effects of taking benzodiazepines with other drugs can be unpredictable and dangerous, and could cause:

- **Benzodiazepines + alcohol or opiates (such as heroin):** breathing difficulties, an increased risk of overdose and death.

The use of benzodiazepines to help with the 'come down' effects of stimulant drugs (such as amphetamines or ecstasy) may result in a cycle of dependence on both types of drug.

Withdrawal

Giving up benzodiazepines after using them for a long time is challenging because the body has to get used to functioning without them. This is why it's important to seek advice from a health professional when planning to stop taking benzodiazepines.

Withdrawal symptoms vary from person to person and are different depending on the type of benzodiazepine being taken. Symptoms can last from a few weeks to a year and can include:

- Headaches
- Aching or twitching muscles
- Dizziness and tremors
- Nausea, vomiting, stomach pains
- Bizarre dreams, difficulty sleeping, fatigue
- Poor concentration
- Anxiety and irritability
- Altered perception, heightening of senses
- Delusions, hallucinations and paranoia
- Seizures

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Level 12, 607 Bourke Street, Melbourne
PO Box 818 North Melbourne Victoria Australia 3051

Email druginfo@adf.org.au Telephone **1300 85 85 84**

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May 2016

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