

Fact Sheet

Benzodiazepines

What are benzodiazepines?

Benzodiazepines (pronounced ben-zoh-die-az-a-pins) are depressant drugs.

This means that they slow the activity of the central nervous system and the messages going 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.

Common chemical and brand names

Benzodiazepines are known by their chemical (generic) name or their brand name. In each case the drug is exactly the same, usually made by different companies. Some common benzodiazepines include:

Generic name	Brand name
Diazepam	Ducene® and Valium®
Oxazepam	Alepam®, Murelax® and Serepax®
Nitrazepam	Alodorm® and Mogadon®
Temazepam	Euhypnos® and Normison®

Benzodiazepines are also sometimes referred to as benzos, tranx, sleepers, downers, pills, serras (Serepax®), moggies (Mogadon®) or normies (Normison®).

How are benzodiazepines used?

Benzodiazepines are usually swallowed. Some people inject benzodiazepines, however this method carries significant risk of harms such as collapsed veins, damage to organs, stroke and even death.

Effects of benzodiazepines

The effects of any drug (including benzodiazepines) vary from person to person. How they affect a person depends on many things including their size, weight and health, whether they are accustomed to taking the drug, whether other drugs are present in their body, and the amount taken.

There is no safe level of drug use. Use of any drug carries some risk – even prescribed medications can produce unwanted side effects.

Low to moderate doses

The effects of benzodiazepines may be felt within an hour and, depending on whether they are short, intermediate or long acting, the effects can last from two and a half hours to a week. Some of the effects that may be experienced 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, increased risk of accidents and falling over
- > nausea and loss of appetite
- > vomiting, diarrhoea and constipation.

Higher doses

Higher doses of benzodiazepines can result in drowsiness, over-sedation and sleep. They may produce an effect similar to drinking a large amount of alcohol. Other effects can include jitteriness, excitability, mood swings and aggressive behaviour.

Very high doses

A very high dose of benzodiazepines can cause:

- > slow, shallow breathing
- > unconsciousness or coma
- > death (more likely when taken with another drug such as alcohol).

Coming down

As the effects of benzodiazepines begin to wear off, a person may experience a range of effects similar to a hangover from alcohol such as:

- > reduced alertness
- > sleepiness
- > headache.

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Long-term effects

Some of the long-term effects include:

- > impaired thinking or memory loss
- > weakness, lethargy and lack of motivation
- > headaches
- > drowsiness, sleepiness and fatigue
- > nausea
- > difficulty sleeping or disturbing dreams
- > anxiety and depression
- > irritability, paranoia and aggression
- > personality change
- > skin rashes and weight gain.

Taking benzodiazepines with other drugs

The likelihood of an overdose is increased if benzodiazepines are taken with other depressant drugs such as alcohol, or opiates such as heroin. Taking benzodiazepines with other depressant drugs also increases the risk of breathing difficulties.

If benzodiazepines are taken with stimulants such as amphetamines or ecstasy, the body is put under a lot of stress as it tries to deal with the competing effects.

Taking benzodiazepines after using stimulants to help with the symptoms of the 'comedown', can lead to a cycle of dependence on both drugs.

Pregnancy and breastfeeding

Drugs can be passed on to an unborn baby through the placenta, or to an infant in breast milk. This could harm the baby and increase the chances of going into labour early. Check with your health professional if you are taking or planning to take any drugs during pregnancy, or while breastfeeding.

Driving

Driving ability may be affected by benzodiazepines. You may not notice that your driving is affected until you find yourself in a situation where you need to respond quickly and accurately to avoid an accident.

Tolerance and dependence

There is evidence that benzodiazepines are highly addictive after prolonged use. People who regularly use these drugs can develop dependence and tolerance to them, which means they need to take larger amounts to get the same effect.

People who are dependent on benzodiazepines find that using them becomes far more important than other activities in their life. They crave benzodiazepines and find it very difficult to stop using them.

Dependence on benzodiazepines can be psychological, physical or both. People who are psychologically dependent on benzodiazepines may find they feel an urge to use them when they are in specific surroundings or socialising with friends. Physical dependence occurs when a person's body adapts to benzodiazepines and becomes used to functioning when they are present.

Getting help

If your use of benzodiazepines is affecting your health, family, relationships, work, school, financial or other life situation, you should seek help.

A good place to start is with your local doctor who is likely to know your medical history. Your doctor can give you information, a referral to a treatment service and ongoing treatment after specialist alcohol treatment is completed.

Another option is self-referral. Many treatment services allow this and you can contact them directly.

Further information

The DrugInfo website (www.druginfo.adf.org.au) has information on:

- > Support services in your state or territory
- > Treatment options.

The Australian Drug Information Network website (www.adin.com.au) has further information about self-referral treatment services.



druginfo.adf.org.au



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