

# Benzodiazepines

This factsheet gives information about benzodiazepine medication. Your doctor may prescribe benzodiazepines if you have severe anxiety or if you are very distressed.

## Key Points.

- Benzodiazepines are a sedative
- They are used to treat symptoms such as anxiety.
- You may get side effects from taking this kind of medication. Talk to your doctor if you are worried about side effects.
- Benzodiazepines are addictive. You should not take them for longer than one month.
- You may get withdrawal symptoms if you stop taking benzodiazepines. Talk to your doctor before stopping medication.

### This factsheet covers:

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## 1. What are benzodiazepines?

Benzodiazepines are a type of sedative.<sup>1</sup> They are usually a short-term treatment given for 2-4 weeks.<sup>2</sup> They are sometimes known as 'benzos.'

Benzodiazepines will usually be taken through your mouth by table or solution. In rare situations they can be injected to help control panic attacks.<sup>3</sup>

## 2. What are benzodiazepines used for?

### Severe anxiety

You may be given benzodiazepines for the short-term relief of severe anxiety. You should not be given them for long term relief.<sup>4</sup>

### Panic disorders

You may be given benzodiazepines:<sup>5</sup>

- When you first start taking antidepressants, or
- if you don't respond to antidepressants.

### Sleeping

Benzodiazepines can be used to treat insomnia. Insomnia means that you find it difficult to fall asleep or stay asleep.

You should only be offered benzodiazepines to treat insomnia if it is severe, disabling or is causing you a lot of distress.<sup>6</sup>

They should only be offered for short term use.

### Acute alcohol withdrawal<sup>7</sup>

Long acting benzodiazepines are used to help with the effects of acute alcohol withdrawal.

You should stay in hospital during withdrawal if you have severe alcohol dependence. Withdrawal without medical support can cause dangerous side effects such as seizures.

You can find out more information about:

- Anxiety
- Drugs, alcohol and mental health

at [www.rethink.org](http://www.rethink.org). Or call our General Enquiries Team on 0121 522 7007 and ask them to send you a copy of our factsheet.

### 3. Are there different types of benzodiazepines?

There are 2 different types of benzodiazepines. These are hypnotics and anxiolytics.

Hypnotics are shorter acting. They are mostly used for treating sleep problems such as insomnia.<sup>8</sup>

Anxiolytics are longer lasting. They are mostly used for treating anxiety.<sup>9</sup>

Below is a table of benzodiazepines and their trade names.

<b>Hypnotic Benzodiazepines</b>		
<b>Medicine name</b>	<b>Trade name</b>	<b>Use to treat</b>
Flurazepam	Dalmane	Sleep problems <sup>10</sup>
Loprazolam		Sleep problems <sup>11</sup>
Lormetazepam		Sleep problems <sup>12</sup>
Nitrazepam	Mogadon	Sleep problems <sup>13</sup>
Temazepam		Sleep problems <sup>14</sup>
<b>Anxiolytic Benzodiazepines</b>		
<b>Medicine name</b>	<b>Trade name</b>	<b>Use to treat</b>
Alprazolam		Anxiety disorders <sup>15</sup>
Chlordiazepoxide Hydrochloride		Anxiety disorders, <sup>16</sup> alcohol withdrawal <sup>17</sup>
Diazepam	Rimapan,	Anxiety disorders, <sup>18</sup> Anxiety with sleep problems, <sup>19</sup> alcohol withdrawal, <sup>20</sup> muscle spasms
Lorazepam	Ativan	Anxiety disorders <sup>21</sup>
Oxazepam		Anxiety disorders, <sup>22</sup>
Clobazam	Tapclob	Anxiety disorder <sup>23</sup>

You can find more information about '**Anxiety Disorders**' at [www.rethink.org](http://www.rethink.org). Or call our General Enquires team on 0121 522 7007 and ask them to send you a copy of our factsheet.

### 4. Are there any side effects?

Not everyone who takes benzodiazepines will get side effects. Talk to your doctor if you are worried about side effects.

#### **Addiction**

You should only be prescribed benzodiazepines for the shortest amount of time possible. Taking benzodiazepines regularly for a few weeks or more can lead to addiction.<sup>24</sup> Doctors recommend that you only take them for 2-4 weeks.<sup>25</sup>

Intermittent use may help to avoid addiction.<sup>26</sup> Intermittent means that you don't take it regularly. For example, you don't take it every day.

The risk of addiction is higher if you have a history of drug or alcohol abuse. Or if you have a personality disorder.<sup>27</sup>

### **Common side effects**

Common side effects include:<sup>28</sup>

- drowsiness or sleepiness
- dizziness
- headache
- confusion
- numbed emotions
- reduced awareness
- muscle weakness
- tremor
- Ataxia. Such as:<sup>29</sup>
  - balance and walking
  - speaking
  - swallowing
  - your motor skills, such as writing and eating
  - vision

You have an increased risk of falls and associated fractures if you are elderly and use benzodiazepines.<sup>30</sup>

### **Less common and rare side effects**

Less common and rare side effects include:<sup>31</sup>

- stomach upset and diarrhoea
- nausea,
- vomiting
- constipation
- depression
- insomnia
- dry mouth
- increased appetite
- memory loss
- delusions
- aggression

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## **5. What if I want to stop taking benzodiazepines?**

Withdrawal symptoms from benzodiazepines can happen if you have been taking the medication regularly for 4-6 weeks.

Talk to your doctor about stopping if you have been taking benzodiazepines regularly for more than 4-6 weeks. They will be able to help you stop taking them.

It is safer to reduce your medication slowly with your doctor's support. This is because your body will be used to the medication and you might experience withdrawal symptoms.<sup>32</sup>

These are some common physical side effects of withdrawal.<sup>33</sup>

- Stiffness
- Weakness
- Stomach problems
- Flu-like symptoms
- Visual problems

These are some common psychological side effects of withdrawal.<sup>34</sup>

- Anxiety
- Insomnia
- Nightmares
- Depersonalisation
- Problems with memory and concentration
- Depression
- Hallucinations. This is when you see, hear, smell or feel things that are not there.
- Delusions. This is where you have beliefs that don't match reality

### **When will withdrawal side effects stop?**

Your withdrawal side effects will usually stop after a few weeks.<sup>35</sup> But they can last longer for a small amount of people. You may not get withdrawal side effects when you stop your benzodiazepine medication.

You should talk to your doctor or local pharmacist if you are worried about the withdrawal effects of benzodiazepines.

### **Is there anything that can help with my symptoms through withdrawal?**<sup>36</sup>

Antidepressant and mood stabilizing drugs may help with the withdrawal effects of benzodiazepines.

If you have insomnia you may benefit from treatment with melatonin.

If you have a panic disorder you may benefit from cognitive behavioural therapy whilst you are coming off the medication.

You can find more information about depersonalisation in our factsheet '**Dissociative Disorders**' at [www.rethink.org](http://www.rethink.org). Or call our General Enquires team on 0121 522 7007 and ask them to send you a copy of our factsheet.

## 6. Do benzodiazepines affect other medication?

Tell your doctor about any medicines you are taking before you start to take benzodiazepines. This includes any supplements or herbal medicines you take. Benzodiazepines can react with other types of medication and cause more side effects such as extra tiredness or low blood pressure. Medication that can react with benzodiazepines includes:<sup>37</sup>

- antidepressants,
- antipsychotic medication,
- antihistamines, and
- beta-blockers.

## 7. Does alcohol affect my benzodiazepines?

Alcohol can increase the sedative effect of benzodiazepines. If you drink alcohol whilst taking benzodiazepines you are likely to feel more tired.<sup>38</sup>

## 8. Can I drive when taking benzodiazepines?

Taking benzodiazepines can affect the way you drive. For example, they can:<sup>39</sup>

- affect your judgement,
- make your reaction times slower, and
- make you tired

If you are affected by your medication you should not drive until the effects wear off.

It is illegal to drive if you are affected by drugs such as benzodiazepines.<sup>40</sup> Ask your doctor if you are safe to drive whilst taking your medication.

You should tell the DVLA if you are taking medication that may affect your driving. You should also tell them if you have a medical condition that could affect your driving.

You can find more information about **‘Driving and mental illness’** at [www.rethink.org](http://www.rethink.org). Or call our General Enquires team on 0121 522 7007 and ask them to send you a copy of our factsheet.

## 9. Can I take my benzodiazepines overseas? <sup>41</sup>

Benzodiazepines are a controlled drug. Controlled drugs mean that there are legal controls that must be followed.

If you travel overseas with your benzodiazepines you need to:

- prove it is prescribed to you, or
- get a personal licence if you're travelling for at 3 months or more. Or carrying enough medication to last you 3 months or more.

### How do I prove my medication is prescribed to me?

You need to get a letter from the professional who prescribed you the medication. The letter must include:

- your name,
- what countries you are going to,
- when you are going to these countries,
- a list of your medicine,
- your dose and strength of medication, and
- the signature of the professional who gave you the medication.

### How do I get a personal licence?

You will need to:

- fill in an application form,
- get a letter to prove your medication is prescribed to you
- send your application and letter to [dflu.ie@homeoffice.gsi.gov.uk](mailto:dflu.ie@homeoffice.gsi.gov.uk)
- apply at least 10 days before travel

You can fill out your application form through the below website link:

[www.gov.uk/government/publications/personal-import-export-licence-application-form](http://www.gov.uk/government/publications/personal-import-export-licence-application-form)

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## 10. What else should I consider before taking benzodiazepines?

### Sex

Benzodiazepines do not have any known effects on sexual performance. But drowsiness might have an impact on your sex life.

### Pregnancy

Benzodiazepines should not be used regularly during pregnancy. They should only be used to help control seizures. If benzodiazepines are taken during pregnancy, this can affect the baby when it is born. The baby can get withdrawal symptoms. The baby can have breathing problems and low body temperature.<sup>42</sup>

Tell your midwife and other healthcare professionals if you've been taking benzodiazepines through your pregnancy.

But there is no evidence to say that taking benzodiazepines before pregnancy will have a negative effect on pregnancy or birth.

### **Breastfeeding**

You should not breastfeed while taking benzodiazepines.<sup>43</sup> Medication you take will be in your breast milk.

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## Useful Contacts

### **PostScript 360**

This is a user-led charity. It aims to help people and their families who are affected by addiction to benzodiazepines, tranquilisers, sleeping tablets and any other drugs which have similar effects.

**Telephone:** 0117 966 3629

**Address:** 1<sup>st</sup> Floor, East Wing, The Kingswood Estate, Britannia Road, Kingswood, Bristol, BS15 8DP

**Email:** [info@postscript360.org.uk](mailto:info@postscript360.org.uk)

**Website:** <https://postscript360.org.uk/>

### **Bristol and District Tranquiliser Project**

This organisation gives support and advice to people who are taking prescribed benzodiazepines, antidepressants and sleeping tablets. They also support people who are thinking about taking them or are trying to withdraw from them.

**Telephone:** 0117 950 0020 (10am – 3:30pm Monday – Thursday).

**Address:** Suite 5A Westbury Court, Church Road, Westbury-on-Trym, Bristol, BS9 3EF.

**Website:** [www.btpinfo.org.uk](http://www.btpinfo.org.uk)

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## References

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<sup>1</sup> Joint Formulary Committee. *British National Formulary 69*. London: Pharmaceutical Press; 2015. Page 225 para 4.1.

<sup>2</sup> As note 1 page 226. Para 4.1

<sup>3</sup> As note 1 page 231. Para 4.1.2 benzodiazepines

<sup>4</sup> As note 1 page 231. Para 4.1.2 benzodiazepines

<sup>5</sup> As note 1 page 231. Para 4.1.2 benzodiazepines

<sup>6</sup> As note 1 page 226. Para 4.1.2 benzodiazepines

<sup>7</sup> As note 1 page 338

<sup>8</sup> As note 1 page 226. Para 4.1.1

<sup>9</sup> David Taylor, Carole Paton, Shitij Kapur. *The Maudsley Prescribing Guidelines*. 12<sup>th</sup> edition. Wiley Blackwell. Page 343.

<sup>10</sup> As note 1 page 227 Para 4.1.2 benzodiazepines

<sup>11</sup> As note 1 page 227 Para 4.1.2 benzodiazepines

<sup>12</sup> As note 1 page 227 Para 4.1.2 benzodiazepines

<sup>13</sup> As note 1 page 227 Para 4.1.2 benzodiazepines

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- <sup>14</sup> As note 1 page 227 Para 4.1.2 benzodiazepines
- <sup>15</sup> As note 1 page 231 Para 4.1.2 benzodiazepines
- <sup>16</sup> As note 1 page 231 Para 4.1.2 benzodiazepines
- <sup>17</sup> As note 1 page 338
- <sup>18</sup> As note 1 page 231 Para 4.1.2 benzodiazepines
- <sup>19</sup> As note 1 page 227 Para 4.1.2 benzodiazepines
- <sup>20</sup> As note 1 page 232 para diazepam
- <sup>21</sup> As note 1 page 231 Para 4.1.2 benzodiazepines
- <sup>22</sup> As note 1 page 231 Para 4.1.2 benzodiazepines
- <sup>23</sup> As note 1 page 231 Para 4.1.2 benzodiazepines
- <sup>24</sup> As note 1 page 225, para.4.1.
- <sup>25</sup> As note 1 page 226 s.4.1.
- <sup>26</sup> As note 9 page 346
- <sup>27</sup> EMC. *Diazepam*.  
<https://www.medicines.org.uk/emc/product/4522/smpc%20para%204.8>  
para 4.4 (accessed 9th August 2019)
- <sup>28</sup> EMC. *Diazepam*. <https://www.medicines.org.uk/emc/product/4522/smpc%20para%204.8> (accessed 9th August 2019)
- <sup>29</sup> NHS. Ataxia. <https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/ataxia/> (accessed 9<sup>th</sup> August 2019)
- <sup>30</sup> As note 28
- <sup>31</sup> As note 28
- <sup>32</sup> As note 9 page 346.
- <sup>33</sup> As note 9 page 346.
- <sup>34</sup> As note 9 page 346.
- <sup>35</sup> As note 9 page 346.
- <sup>36</sup> As note 9 page 348
- <sup>37</sup> As note 1 page 918
- <sup>38</sup> As note 1 page 918
- <sup>39</sup> As note 1 page 225
- <sup>40</sup> s4, Road Traffic Act 1988 c52
- <sup>41</sup> Gov.uk. *Travelling with a medicine containing a controlled drug*.  
<https://www.gov.uk/travelling-controlled-drugs> (accessed 13th August 2019)
- <sup>42</sup> As note 1 page 227 para4.1.1
- <sup>43</sup> As note 1 page 227.

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### Rethink Mental Illness Advice Service

Phone 0808 801 0525

Monday to Friday, 9:30am to 4pm  
(excluding bank holidays)

Email [advice@rethink.org](mailto:advice@rethink.org)

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#### Did this help?

We'd love to know if this information helped you.

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**or write to us at Rethink Mental Illness:**

RAIS  
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Birmingham B9 9LL

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 [www.rethink.org](http://www.rethink.org)

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#### Don't have access to the web?

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#### Need to talk to an adviser?

If you need practical advice, call us on 0808 801 0525 between 9:30am to 4pm, Monday to Friday. Our specialist advisers can help you with queries like how to apply for benefits, get access to care or make a complaint.

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