

# Benzodiazepines

This factsheet gives information about benzodiazepine medication. This medication is sometimes used to treat anxiety. Your doctor may prescribe this medication if your anxiety has become severe or if you are very distressed.



- Benzodiazepines are a type of medication that are used to treat anxiety.
- You may get side effects from taking this kind of medication. If you get side effects that you are worried about, you should see your doctor.
- You can become addicted to benzodiazepines. Therefore, you should not take them for longer than one month.
- You may get withdrawal symptoms when you stop taking benzodiazepines. You should talk to your doctor before you stop taking them. Your doctor may gradually take you off your medication if you have been taking them for a long time.

## **This factsheet covers:**

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## 1. What are benzodiazepines?

Your doctor may offer you benzodiazepines if you have symptoms of anxiety which are causing you a lot of distress or if you are having difficulty sleeping.

Benzodiazepines are a type of sedative and are mostly used as short-term treatment. They work by making the calming chemicals released by your body more powerful.

You should not take benzodiazepines for longer than one month. If you take them for longer, you can become tolerant to them (meaning you need more to have the same effect), and you may also become dependent (addicted) to them.

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## 2. Are there different types of benzodiazepines?

There are two different types of benzodiazepines - shorter acting benzodiazepines called 'hypnotics' (used for treating sleep problems such as insomnia), and longer acting benzodiazepines called 'anxiolytics' (for treating symptoms of anxiety).<sup>1</sup>

You should only be prescribed either types for the shortest amount of time possible.

Below is a table of benzodiazepines and their trade names<sup>2</sup>

<b>Hypnotic Benzodiazepines</b>		
<b>Medicine name</b>	<b>Trade name</b>	<b>Use to treat</b>
Flurazepam	Dalmane	Sleep problems
Loprazolam	Loprazolam	Sleep problems
Lormetazepam	Lormetazepam	Sleep problems
Nitrazepam	Mogadon	Sleep problems
Temazepam	Restoril	Sleep problems
<b>Anxiolytic Benzodiazepines</b>		
<b>Medicine name</b>	<b>Trade name</b>	<b>Use to treat</b>
Alprazolam	Xanax	Anxiety disorders
Chlordiazepoxide	Librium	Anxiety disorders, alcohol withdrawal
Diazepam	Valium	Anxiety disorders, alcohol withdrawal, muscle spasms
Lorazepam	Ativan	Anxiety disorders
Oxazepam	Serax	Anxiety disorders, alcohol withdrawal

These drugs can come as tablets, capsules and liquids. They should start to work fairly soon after you take them.

For longer term treatment, other options such as talking therapy should be considered.

For further information, please see our factsheets '**Anxiety disorders**' and '**Talking therapies**' which you can download for free at [www.rethink.org](http://www.rethink.org) or call 0300 5000 927 and ask for a copy to be sent to you.

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### 3. Are there any side effects?<sup>3</sup>

Like many drugs some people can get side effects from taking benzodiazepines.

Common side effects are:

- drowsiness or sleepiness
- dizziness

A less common side effect is being unsteady on your feet.

Rarer side effects include:

- headache
- confusion
- low blood pressure (you might feel dizzy when standing up)
- problems with remembering
- feeling aggressive, excitable, talkative, unfriendly or disinhibited.

If you get a blotchy rash, you should stop taking your benzodiazepines and see your doctor immediately.

Not everyone will experience side effects from taking benzodiazepines. If you are getting side effects that you are worried about you should talk to your doctor.

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### 4. What if I want to stop taking benzodiazepines?

If you have been taking benzodiazepines regularly for more than 4-6 weeks you should not stop taking them suddenly. This is because your body will be used to the medication and you will experience withdrawal symptoms.

It is important to talk to your doctor before stopping your benzodiazepine medication. It is safer to gradually come off the medication. Doing so is

also more likely to help you stop taking benzodiazepines, than just stopping suddenly.<sup>4</sup>

Some common withdrawal side effects are<sup>5</sup>:

### **Physical**

- stiffness
- weakness
- stomach problems
- flu-like symptoms
- visual problems

### **Psychological**

- anxiety
- insomnia (trouble sleeping)
- nightmares
- problems with memory and concentration
- depression
- experiencing things that are not there (hallucinations)
- having beliefs that are not the same as other people's reality (delusions)

You will not always get withdrawal side effects when stopping benzodiazepine medication. If you get them they will usually stop after a few weeks. For some people they can last longer.

You should talk to your doctor or local pharmacist if you are worried about how long you have been taking benzodiazepines for or if you want to come off them. You can find more information in about helpful organisations in useful contacts at the end of this factsheet.

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## **5. Do benzodiazepines affect other medication?**

This section is just a summary. You should tell your doctor of any medicines that you may be taking before starting or stopping other medication. This includes herbal or complementary remedies or medicines.

Benzodiazepines can cause sedation or sleepiness. Other medication can make this worse. Some of these medications can be certain painkillers, antidepressants, antipsychotic medication, antihistamines, and beta-blockers.<sup>6</sup>

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## **6. Does alcohol affect my benzodiazepines?**

If you drink alcohol while taking benzodiazepine medication you will feel sleepy. You might notice this effect from even very small amounts of

alcohol. The medication can also increase the effect of alcohol, so it is best to avoid alcohol when taking benzodiazepines.<sup>7</sup>

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## 7. Can I drive when taking benzodiazepines?

Your ability to drive may be affected by taking benzodiazepines. You may also feel drowsy the day after you take them. You should not drive until these effects wear off or you know how your drug affects you. Your reaction times may also be affected by taking benzodiazepines.<sup>8</sup>

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.

For further information on this, please our factsheet '**Driving and mental illness**' which you can download for free at [www.rethink.org](http://www.rethink.org) or call 0300 5000 927 and ask for a copy to be sent to you.

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

### **Sex**

You may find that taking benzodiazepines cause sleepiness or sedation which could affect your sex life.<sup>9</sup> However, benzodiazepines do not have any known significant effects on people's sex lives.

### **Pregnancy**<sup>10</sup>

Taking benzodiazepines during the first three months of pregnancy is associated with an increased risk of oral clefts in newborns. Taking this medication during the last three months is linked with the newborn baby being more limp than is usual. You should talk to your doctor about options if you are planning to have a baby.

### **Breast feeding**

The benefits and risks of breast feeding should be weighed up. Your doctor or psychiatrist should talk about your options when deciding about breast feeding..

If you are taking diazepam it can pass into your breast milk. If you take high doses during later stages of pregnancy or labour might cause your baby to have poor muscle tone, neonatal hypothermia (difficulty staying warm) or neonatal respiratory depression (poor breathing).<sup>11</sup>

Lorazepam, temazepam and clonazepam can also pass into breast milk in small amounts. But there are not many negative effects reported.<sup>12</sup> It is strongly advised that you talk to your doctor about your options if you are planning to breast feed.

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## Battle Against Tranquilizers

This is a user-led charity based in Bristol who aim to help anyone affected by addiction to benzodiazepines, tranquilizers, sleeping tablets and any other drugs which have similar effects.

**Helpline:** 0844 826 9317

**Address:** PO Box 658, Bristol, BS99 1XP

**Email:** [support@bataid.org](mailto:support@bataid.org)

## Council for Information on Tranquillisers, Antidepressants, and Painkillers

CITAp (formerly CITA) is a charitable organisation, established in 1987 to provide support and information for individuals, families, friends and professional advisors dealing with prescribed tranquillisers, sleeping tablets, and antidepressants.

**Helpline:** 0151 932 0102 (10am-1pm, Monday to Friday, weekends and bank holidays)

**Address:** CITA, The JDI Centre, 3-11 Mersey View, Waterloo, Liverpool, L22 6QA

**Email:** [cita@citap.org.uk](mailto:cita@citap.org.uk)

**Web:** [www.citawithdrawal.org.uk](http://www.citawithdrawal.org.uk)

## TASHA Foundation

A charity which offers free online counseling for mental health and drug and alcohol problems.

**Website:** [www.tasha-foundation.org.uk/home/](http://www.tasha-foundation.org.uk/home/)

**Online Counseling:** [www.haveigotaproblem.com/messenger/](http://www.haveigotaproblem.com/messenger/)



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<sup>1</sup> Taylor, D. Paton, C. & Kapur, S. *The Maudsley Prescribing Guidelines in Psychiatry*. 11<sup>th</sup> edition. Wiley Blackwell. 2012.

<sup>2</sup> Joint Formulary Committee. *British National Formulary 63*.

Pharmaceutical Press. 2012 Available at

<http://www.evidence.nhs.uk/formulary/bnf/current> [Accessed August 2014]

<sup>3</sup> Choice and Medication. *Benzodiazepines*. Available at

<http://www.choiceandmedication.org/nsft/class/1/> [Accessed August 2014]

<sup>4</sup> See reference 2

<sup>5</sup> See reference 2

<sup>6</sup> See reference 4

<sup>7</sup> See reference 4

<sup>8</sup> See reference 4

<sup>9</sup> See reference 4

<sup>10</sup> See reference 2

<sup>11</sup> See reference 2

<sup>12</sup> See reference 2

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## Rethink Advice & Information Service

**Phone 0300 5000 927**

**Monday to Friday, 10am to 1pm**

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

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The Rethink Advice & Information Service welcomes your feedback on whether this information was helpful to you. You can provide feedback in the following ways:

**By email:** [feedback@rethink.org](mailto:feedback@rethink.org)

**By post:**

Rethink Advice & Information Service

Rethink Mental Illness

89 Albert Embankment

London SE1 7TP

**By telephone:** 0300 5000 927



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