

# Benzodiazepines

This factsheet gives information about benzodiazepine medication. Your doctor may prescribe benzodiazepines if you are experiencing severe anxiety or if you're very distressed. This information is for people affected by mental illness in England who are 18 or over. It's also for their carers, friends and relatives and anyone interested in this subject.

## Key Points.

- Benzodiazepines are a sedative.
- They're used to treat symptoms such as anxiety.
- You may get side effects from taking this kind of medication. Talk to your doctor if you're worried about side effects.
- Benzodiazepines are addictive. You shouldn't be prescribed them for more than one month.
- You may get withdrawal symptoms if you stop taking benzodiazepines. You can talk to your doctor before stopping medication.

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## 1. What are benzodiazepines?

Benzodiazepines are a type of sedative medication.<sup>1</sup> They're 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 tablet or solution. In rare situations, they can be injected to help control panic attacks.<sup>3</sup>

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## 2. What are benzodiazepines used for?

### Severe anxiety

You may be offered benzodiazepines for the short-term relief of severe anxiety. You shouldn't be prescribed them for long-term relief.<sup>4</sup>

### Panic disorders

Antidepressants are sometimes offered as treatment for panic disorder.<sup>5</sup>

You may be offered benzodiazepines:<sup>6</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's severe, disabling, or causing you a lot of distress.<sup>7</sup>

They should only be offered for short-term use.

### Acute alcohol withdrawal<sup>8</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 more information about:

- Anxiety disorders
- 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.

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### 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>9</sup>

Anxiolytics are longer lasting. They are mostly used for treating anxiety.<sup>10</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>11</sup>
Loprazolam		Sleep problems <sup>12</sup>
Lormetazepam		Sleep problems <sup>13</sup>
Nitrazepam	Mogadon	Sleep problems <sup>14</sup>
Temazepam		Sleep problems <sup>15</sup>

  

<b>Anxiolytic Benzodiazepines</b>		
<b>Medicine name</b>	<b>Trade name</b>	<b>Use to treat</b>
Alprazolam		Anxiety disorders <sup>16</sup>
Chlordiazepoxide Hydrochloride		Anxiety disorders, <sup>17</sup> alcohol withdrawal <sup>18</sup>
Diazepam	Rimapan	Anxiety disorders, <sup>19</sup> Anxiety with sleep problems, <sup>20</sup> alcohol withdrawal, <sup>21</sup> muscle spasms
Lorazepam	Ativan	Anxiety disorders <sup>22</sup>
Oxazepam		Anxiety disorders, <sup>23</sup>
Clobazam	Tapclob	Anxiety disorder <sup>24</sup>

You can find more information about:

- Anxiety disorders
- 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.

#### 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.

##### **Are benzodiazepines addictive?**

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>25</sup> Doctors recommend that you only take them for 2-4 weeks.<sup>26</sup>

Intermittent use may help to avoid addiction.<sup>27</sup> Intermittent use 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:<sup>28</sup>

- have a history of drug or alcohol abuse, or
- live with a personality disorder.

##### **What are the common side effects?**

Common side effects include:<sup>29</sup>

- anxiety
- depression
- drowsiness or sleepiness
- dizziness
- headache
- nausea
- confusion
- muscle weakness
- tremor
- Ataxia, such as:<sup>30</sup>
  - balance and walking
  - speaking
  - swallowing
  - your motor skills, such as writing and eating
  - vision

Some of these side effects may disappear once your body has adjusted.<sup>31</sup>

You have an increased risk of falls and associated fractures if you're elderly and use benzodiazepines.<sup>32</sup>

##### **What are the less common and rare side effects?**

Less common and rare side effects include:<sup>33</sup>

- Agitation
- Abnormal behaviour

- Skin reactions
- Memory loss
- Hallucinations
- Aggression

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

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

It's 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>34</sup>

These are some common physical side effects of withdrawal:<sup>35</sup>

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

These are some common psychological side effects of withdrawal.<sup>36</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

You can find more information about:

- Depression
- Dissociation and dissociative disorders – This includes information on Depersonalisation

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.

## When will withdrawal side effects stop?

Your withdrawal side effects will usually stop after a few weeks.<sup>37</sup> But they can last longer for a small number of people. You may not get withdrawal side effects when you stop your benzodiazepine medication.

You can 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>38</sup>

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

If you experience 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.

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### **6. Do benzodiazepines affect other medications?**

Tell your doctor about any medicines you're 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>39</sup>

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

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### **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>40</sup>

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### **8. Can I drive when taking benzodiazepines?**

Taking benzodiazepines can affect the way you drive. For example, they can:<sup>41</sup>

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

If you're affected by your medication, you shouldn't drive until the effects wear off.

Benzodiazepines are classed as ‘controlled drugs’. If you drive and have above a certain limit of these drugs in your blood, you can be found guilty of an offence. You can be found guilty even if the drugs weren’t affecting your driving.<sup>42</sup>

You might be taking Diazepam, Lorazepam, Temazepam, Clonazepam, Oxazepam and Flunitrazepam. You should speak to your doctor about how they’ll affect your driving.<sup>43</sup>

You can drive after taking these drugs if:<sup>44,45</sup>

- you’ve been prescribed them, and you’ve followed advice on how to take them by a healthcare professional,
- you’ve followed advice about how long you should leave between taking these drugs and driving, and
- they aren’t causing you to be unfit to drive even if you’re above the specified limits.

You should tell the DVLA 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 Enquiries team on 0121 522 7007 and ask them to send you a copy of our factsheet.

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## 9. Can I take my benzodiazepines overseas?<sup>46</sup>

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

If you’re leaving the UK with benzodiazepines, you should be able to prove they’re yours with either a:

- prescription, or
- letter from your doctor.

Other countries have their own import laws for prescription medicine and controlled drugs.

You could get a fine or go to prison if you travel with medicine that is illegal in another country. You can check with the embassy of the country you’re going to before you travel. You can find contact details for embassies here: [www.gov.uk/government/publications/foreign-embassies-in-the-uk](http://www.gov.uk/government/publications/foreign-embassies-in-the-uk)

You can email the home office at [dflu.ie@homeoffice.gov.uk](mailto:dflu.ie@homeoffice.gov.uk) for more advice on leaving the UK with controlled drugs.

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

### Will benzodiazepines affect my sex life?

An uncommon side effect of benzodiazepines can be an impacted sex drive.<sup>47</sup> More common side effects of benzodiazepines such as fatigue may also affect your sex life.<sup>48</sup>

### Will benzodiazepines affect me if I become pregnant?

Benzodiazepines shouldn't be used regularly during pregnancy. They should only be used to help control seizures.<sup>49</sup>

Speak to your doctor if you take them and:

- suspect you may be pregnant, or
- you are pregnant, or
- you are trying to get pregnant<sup>50</sup>

If benzodiazepines are taken during pregnancy, this can affect the baby when it is born. The baby can get withdrawal symptoms or have breathing problems and low body temperature.<sup>51</sup>

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

### Can I breastfeed if I take benzodiazepines?

You shouldn't breastfeed if you take benzodiazepines.<sup>52</sup> The medication will be in your breast milk and could cause issues for your baby.

## 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, tranquillisers, 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 Tranquilliser 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

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

Call us on 0121 522 7007. We are open Monday to Friday, 9am to 5pm, and we will send you the information you need in the post.

### Need to talk to an adviser?

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