BENZODIAZEPINES
WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW ABOUT SLEEPING PILLS
WHAT ARE BENZODIAZEPINES?

Benzodiazepines are commonly prescribed medications, accounting for around one in every 20 prescriptions written by GPs in Australia. They are prescribed in a tablet or capsule form that is not intended for injection.

Benzodiazepines are also known as ‘benzos’ and are also a type of sedative. They may also be referred to as sleeping tablets or sleeping pills.

Benzodiazepines are prescribed for a range of problems, including anxiety and insomnia. They have anxiolytic (anxiety-reducing), sedative and muscle relaxant effects. They can also reduce or stop convulsions.

They can be addictive, so are usually prescribed for short-term problems; only for a few weeks usage or for very occasional use. The most well-known is diazepam or Valium.1, 2

Examples of benzodiazepines:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Generic Name</th>
<th>Brand Names</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>diazepam</td>
<td>Valium, Antenex, Ducene, Valpam</td>
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<tr>
<td>alprazolam</td>
<td>Xanax, Kalma, Alprax</td>
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<tr>
<td>clonazepam</td>
<td>Rivotril, Paxam</td>
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<tr>
<td>nitrazepam</td>
<td>Mogadon</td>
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<tr>
<td>oxazepam</td>
<td>Serepax</td>
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<tr>
<td>temazepam</td>
<td>Normison, Euhypnos, Temaze</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

WHAT IS STILNOX?

Another drug sometimes prescribed for sleep problems is Stilnox (zolpidem). It isn’t strictly a benzodiazepine, but it has similar characteristics. It has received a lot of media attention in recent years due to people having accidents while sleepwalking under the influence. It is also considered to be habit-forming (addictive) and regular use is not recommended.2
WHAT ARE THE EFFECTS?

Benzodiazepines are depressant drugs, meaning that they slow down the central nervous system, or reduce the function of the brain and body. They can cause feelings of relaxation and mild contentment, or even sedation and total blackout. Once swallowed, they usually take about half an hour to take effect. The length of time the effects last for varies.

Effects of benzodiazepines may include:

- Muscle relaxation
- Slow pulse rate
- A feeling of calmness
- Slow pulse rate
- Drowsiness
- Shallow breathing
- Dizziness
- Slurred speech
- Blurred vision
- Confusion
- Loss of balance and coordination
- A ‘hangover’ effect the following day
- Blackouts

WHAT ARE THE RISKS?

If used as prescribed and recommended, benzodiazepines are very effective medications. However, there are risks, particularly if they’re not used properly, or are used regularly (e.g. daily) for more than a few weeks. These include:

- Dependence (addiction)
- Aggression or violence, particularly if the dose is high, the person is quite impulsive, has a history of aggression, or is also under the influence of alcohol
- Skin and vein problems (if injected)
- Withdrawals (these can lead to seizures and death if not managed correctly – see below)
- Blackouts
- Overdose (especially if the person also drinks alcohol, takes other depressant drugs such as heroin, or opioid painkillers such as OxyContin or morphine)

ARE BENZODIAZEPINES ADDICTIVE?

Benzodiazepine dependence (addiction) can be physical and/or psychological. Signs of physical dependence include tolerance, where over time the person needs more to get the same effect, and withdrawals when use is stopped.

Approximately 4 in every 10 people who take benzodiazepines regularly for more than 6 weeks will experience withdrawal symptoms. These usually start between 2–5 days after the drug is last used and reach a peak at around 7–10 days (the length of time depends on which drug is taken, as some are longer-acting than others). Some people continue to have withdrawal symptoms for several months.
Suddenly stopping benzodiazepine use can result in withdrawal symptoms, some of which are potentially life-threatening. Symptoms usually last around 2–3 weeks but may last longer, depending on the benzodiazepine used. People wishing to stop their benzodiazepine use should talk to a GP about developing a plan to gradually reduce their dose and minimise the risk of withdrawal problems.

Withdrawal symptoms include:

- Feeling anxious, tense or agitated
- Panic attacks
- Dizziness
- Confusion
- Abnormal sensations (e.g. the person may have a metallic taste in his/her mouth or feel like the world is moving underneath him/her when it isn’t)
- Feeling down or depressed
- Palpitations
- Visual disturbances (e.g. seeing things moving when they’re not)
- Uncontrollable twitches, muscle spasms or convulsions
- Insomnia
- Stomach and muscle cramps
- Loss of balance
- Problems with moving around (akinesia)
- Being over-sensitive to light, sound and touch
- Short-term memory problems
- Overheating and excessive sweating
- Symptoms of psychosis, including hallucinations or delusional beliefs (e.g. the person may believe that someone is ‘out to get’ him/her)
- Epileptic fits or seizures (these can be fatal)

**SOURCES**

FOR MORE INFORMATION

We have listed some of the national telephone helplines and websites below.

**Australian Drug Foundation**
Provides information about drugs and links to services in each state and territory
www.adf.org.au

**DrugInfo Line**
Provides information about drugs and alcohol. Open 9am-5pm, Monday to Friday
1300 85 85 84 or 03 8672 5983. Or visit www.druginfo.adf.org.au

**Just Ask Us**
Provides information about drugs, alcohol, health and well-being
www.justaskus.org.au

**Kids Helpline**
Free, private and confidential telephone and online counselling service for young people aged 5–25 years
Open 24 Hours 1800 55 1800

**Lifeline**
24 hour crisis line 131114
Also available is one-on-one chatlines for crisis support, visit

**Counselling Online**
Free, confidential counselling service for people using drugs, their families and friends
www.counsellingonline.org.au

**National Drugs Campaign**
Australian Government website provides information about illicit drugs and campaign resources.
www.australia.gov.au/drugs

**Family Drug Support**
For families and friends of people who use drugs or alcohol
1300 368 186
Some state and territory based helplines are listed below.

Alcohol and Drug Information Service (ADIS) (free, confidential advice about drugs and alcohol). Some services operate 24 hours.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>State/Territory</th>
<th>City contact</th>
<th>Regional/Rural contact (free call from landline)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>New South Wales ADIS</td>
<td>02 9361 8000</td>
<td>1800 422 599</td>
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<tr>
<td>Queensland ADIS</td>
<td>1800 177 833</td>
<td>1800 177 833</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Victoria Directline</td>
<td>1800 888 236</td>
<td>1800 888 236</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Western Australia ADIS</td>
<td>08 9442 5000</td>
<td>1800 198 024</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>08 9442 5050 (for parents)</td>
<td>1800 653 203</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Australian Capital Territory Alcohol &amp; Drug Program</td>
<td>02 6207 9977</td>
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<tr>
<td>Northern Territory Alcohol &amp; Other Drug Services</td>
<td>08 8922 8399 (Darwin)</td>
<td>1800 131 350</td>
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<td></td>
<td>08 8951 7580 (Alice Springs)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Tasmania ADIS</td>
<td>1800 811 994</td>
<td>1800 811 994</td>
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<tr>
<td>South Australia ADIS</td>
<td>1300 131 340</td>
<td>1300 131 340</td>
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Callers in Victoria can also contact the Youth Substance Abuse Service (YSAS) on 1800 014 446 (24 hour toll free service)