

What are benzodiazepines?

Benzodiazepines are a group of drugs that may be used to treat severe anxiety. They include diazepam, lorazepam, oxazepam, and chlordiazepoxide. However, they should not be used to relieve mild nervousness or tension caused by daily stress.

Benzodiazepine treatment usually works well and improves the symptoms of anxiety. You can usually stop taking benzodiazepines without any problems if you limit the treatment to a short time (two to four weeks).

Advice if a benzodiazepine is prescribed

Benzodiazepine prescriptions will usually only last a short period, such as a week or so. Please do not ask for more, or for it to be added to your repeat prescription.

If you feel drowsy the next day, do not drive or operate machinery.

Avoid alcohol.

Never give your tablets to anyone and always keep them in a safe place such as in a locked cupboard).

IMPORTANT. Do not stop taking benzodiazepine tablets suddenly if you have been taking them for longer than four weeks as this may cause problems. Make an appointment with your doctor to discuss how to stop your benzodiazepine safely.

Why are doctors reluctant to prescribe tablets for anxiety?

Benzodiazepines may cause significant problems, which include:

Drowsiness and clumsiness: People taking benzodiazepines are known to have more accidents, such as falls and car-related incidents, therefore it may not be safe to drive or operate machinery. Older people taking sleeping tablets have an increased risk of falling and sustaining bone fractures, such as hip injury.

Mood and mental changes: Some people can become aggressive, confused, forgetful, or depressed.

Dependence and tolerance: Your body may rapidly get used to the effect of benzodiazepines, hence they may not help if you keep taking them. Some people may become addicted to benzodiazepines (i.e. dependence problems), which may make it difficult to stop taking them and may cause withdrawal symptoms. Typical withdrawal symptoms include anxiety, panic attacks, sweating, headaches, and shaking. Other symptoms may include the inability to sleep, sickness, or being oversensitive to light and sound.

Dementia, Alzheimer's disease and death: There is evidence that people who take benzodiazepines over extended periods of time are at increased risk of developing dementia, Alzheimer's disease, or premature death.

Benzodiazepines and driving

The DVLA is responsible for deciding if a person is medically unfit to drive.

A significant number of drivers (25%) involved in road traffic accidents have impaired driving skills owing to alcohol, drugs, or illness.

Some benzodiazepines have legally-set blood level limits that police can test for if your driving is considered impaired. This is similar to blood alcohol levels and drink driving.

It is the responsibility of the licence holder to inform the DVLA of any medical condition that may affect safe driving. Failure to notify the DVLA if you have, or have had, these problems is a criminal offence that may lead to a fine of up to £1,000.

It is the responsibility of your GP to ensure that all steps are taken to maintain the safety of the patient and the general public. These issues will be discussed when you attend the appointment regarding your prescription.

WARNING: Benzodiazepines make you sleepy; if this happens do not drive or use tools or machines. Do not drink alcohol.

What if you have been taking sleeping tablets regularly for some time?

As a rule, you should consider reducing or stopping them with advice from your doctor

Do it gradually: reduce the dose a little at a time.

Pick a good time to do it: it is best to wait until any life crises have passed and your stress levels are as low as possible.

Remember to anticipate and accept that you are likely to have a period of increased anxiety when undertaking a tablet reduction regime. However, most people who reduce or stop benzodiazepine medication say they feel much better mentally and physically.

What is the alternative to benzodiazepines?

Check with your doctor or pharmacist whether any other medicines you are taking are likely to cause anxiety problems.

Use the “good relaxation guide”. Copies are available from your GP practice and include helpful advice on how to reduce anxiety.

Your doctor, nurse, or pharmacist can give you advice on how to tackle anxiety without needing to take medication. Advice includes reducing the intake of stimulants such as tea, cola, and energy drinks that contain caffeine, more exercise and suggestions on managing your daily routine.

