

Patient information leaflet - sleeping tablets

The following advice applies to people prescribed benzodiazepines, such as temazepam, loprazolam, lormetazepam, nitrazepam, and “Z” drugs, such as zaleplon, zolpidem, and zopiclone.

Why are doctors reluctant to prescribe sleeping tablets?

Sleeping tablets may cause significant problems, which include:

Drowsiness and clumsiness: People taking sleeping tablets 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 sleeping tablets, hence they may fail to help if you keep taking them. Some people may become addicted to sleeping tablets (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 sleeping tablets are at increased risk of developing dementia, Alzheimer’s disease and premature death.

Advice if a sleeping tablet is prescribed

Sleeping tablet prescriptions will usually only last for 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 sleeping tablets to anyone and always keep them in a safe place such as a locked cupboard.



IMPORTANT. Do not stop taking your sleeping 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 sleeping tablets safely.

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

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 is the alternative to sleeping tablets?

Look for possible causes of sleeplessness such as pain, indigestion, breathlessness, or itching. These may interfere with your sleep, but can often be treated without sleeping tablets.

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

Use the “good sleep guide”. Copies are available from your GP practice and include helpful advice on how to get a good night’s sleep. Good sleep patterns can take weeks to establish, but be confident and you will get there in the end!

Your doctor, nurse, or pharmacist can give you advice on how to tackle poor sleep without drug intervention. Advice includes reducing the intake of stimulants such as tea, cola, and energy drinks that contain caffeine, more exercise and suggestions to improve your bedtime routine.

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.

There is a possibility that you will have worse sleep when undertaking a tablet reduction regime. However, most people who reduce or stop sleeping tablet medication say they feel much better mentally and physically when they have stopped taking the tablets. There are leaflets available from your practice or pharmacy to help you with coping strategies, and tips on how to improve your sleep pattern naturally .