

# Are your sleeping pills still helping?

When prescribed for sleep, benzodiazepines (and z-drugs) are ideally used short-term and intermittently (i.e., less than 2 to 4 weeks). Although they can be very effective at helping with sleep during acute periods of stress and insomnia, they can become unhelpful when used long term for the following reasons:

- 1 They don't fix the actual sleep problem. While a sleeping pill may promote sleep, it doesn't address the cause. Other strategies, such as psychological therapy, more effectively target the cause and what maintains the sleep problem.
- 2 Sleeping pills can make your sleep worse if taken for a long time. Research shows that people taking benzodiazepines wake more frequently and spend less time in deep and dreaming phases of sleep. So, while you might fall asleep more easily, you aren't benefitting from enough time in the more restorative and restful stages of sleep.
- 3 If taken regularly for longer than four weeks, you can become physically dependent on benzodiazepines and z-drugs (even at low doses). In addition, the withdrawal symptoms from sleeping pills can be uncomfortable and prolonged.
- 4 They increase the risk of falls in older adults, can lower blood pressure, impair memory, cause difficulty concentrating, and increase the risk for motor vehicle accidents.
- 5 Use of z-drugs (e.g., Stilnox, Imovane) is linked to unusual sleep behaviours such as sleep walking, sleep eating, sleep-sex, and sleep-driving.
- 6 Even after taking sleeping pills for a relatively short time, there is a "rebound" effect when they are stopped. This means that sleep will worsen for a time. Understandably, many people believe their sleeping problem is still present, so return to taking their sleeping pills.
- 7 Because of withdrawal, benzodiazepines and z-drugs can be difficult to stop taking. Some people may even experience 'breakthrough withdrawal' when withdrawal symptoms emerge despite no change in dose.

Speak with your doctor, pharmacist, or other healthcare professional if you are worried that your sleeping medication may no longer be helping. Do not stop your medication abruptly or before consulting with your prescriber.