

Benzodiazepines

(Anxiety and sleeping medications)

Many people have problems with anxiety, stress, and sleep. Doctors sometimes prescribe benzodiazepines (or z-drugs for sleep) to help with these problems, and some of the more common ones prescribed are:

- Valium
- Temazepam
- Xanax
- Serepax
- Imovane

Although these medications can relieve anxiety and assist with sleep, they are only safe to use for short periods of time. The Royal Australian College of General Practitioners (RACGP) recommend that benzodiazepines (and z-drugs) should not be taken regularly for longer than four weeks.

When taken regularly, the body quickly becomes used to taking these medications and physical dependence can develop. As a result, when you try to cut down or stop taking them withdrawal symptoms can emerge.

Not only is longer term use of benzodiazepines a risk for dependence and withdrawal, but a range of other harms can also develop, including:

- Worsening sleep (↓REM & deep sleep)
- Forgetfulness and memory problems
- Poor coordination and balance (increasing risk of falls and accidents)
- Depression
- Increased anxiety
- Drowsiness

Some **other risks** associated with taking benzodiazepines is combined use with other central nervous system depressants such as opioids and alcohol. When taken together these

can slow breathing, lead to loss of consciousness or even overdose.

As benzodiazepines are recommended to be used short-term, other treatments for managing anxiety and sleep are often required, such as **cognitive behaviour therapy** (CBT). There are many ways to help someone with anxiety, stress, and poor sleep. Some things that people find helpful include relaxation techniques, mindfulness, sleep hygiene, and improving lifestyle habits (e.g., diet & exercise).

If you are concerned that you have been taking benzodiazepines for longer than recommended, **do NOT** stop taking them abruptly. This could put you at risk of more severe withdrawal symptoms. Your dose needs to be gradually reduced over time with assistance from your prescriber.

Some common **withdrawal symptoms** people experience if they stop or reduce their medication too quickly are:

- Rebound insomnia
- Anxiety
- Panic attacks
- Muscle spasms
- Flu like symptoms
- Memory problems
- Fatigue
- Aches and pains
- Gastrointestinal issues
- Perceptual disturbances
- Sensory sensitivities

If you are worried that you might be dependent, please contact your doctor to discuss, or you can call our support line to speak to one of our trained volunteers on **1300 273 266**.