

Benzodiazepines and Zopiclone (ben-zo-dye-ay-ze-peens)

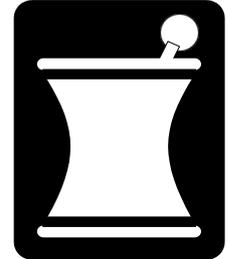
Patient Information - Hillmorton Hospital Pharmacy

Why have I been prescribed a benzodiazepine?

The usual reason is to relieve the symptoms of anxiety and insomnia. Benzodiazepines are also useful to help manage alcohol withdrawal, agitation, epilepsy, hypomania, panic disorder and some other conditions.

Being tense or feeling worried is a normal response to stress (e.g. going to the dentist or starting a new job can be stressful). A small amount of anxiety allows us to cope with difficult situations, but sometimes you can feel anxious or 'worked up' for no reason, or your anxiety is unreasonably severe. When anxiety becomes severe or persistent it can interfere with our daily lives. As well as feeling tense and unable to relax, you may feel sweaty, you may have a fast heartbeat, be short of breath, get stomach cramps, the shakes, or you may look more pale than usual.

People with anxiety may also have trouble falling or staying asleep. This is called insomnia. There are many causes of insomnia, including medicines, party pills, tea, coffee and caffeine containing soft drinks (e.g. Coke, 'V'). Benzodiazepines can help people with anxiety or insomnia.



What exactly are benzodiazepines?

Benzodiazepines are also called anxiolytics (sedatives) and hypnotics (sleeping tablets). This means that they can calm people down and help them to relax or sleep. Some benzodiazepines have been around for more than forty years and millions of people have now taken them. Benzodiazepines are not a cure for your anxiety or insomnia. They only help with the symptoms. Some benzodiazepines are more commonly used for anxiety, e.g. diazepam, clonazepam, and lorazepam.

Other benzodiazepines are more commonly used as sleeping tablets, e.g. temazepam and triazolam. Zopiclone is not a benzodiazepine but acts in a similar way to help sleep.

Are the benzodiazepines safe to take?

It is usually safe to take benzodiazepines regularly for a short time as prescribed by your doctor, but they don't suit everyone. Let your doctor know if any of the following apply to you, as extra care may be needed:

- If you have depression, breathing problems, sleep apnoea, myasthenia gravis, porphyria, or suffer from liver, or kidney trouble.
- If you are pregnant, breastfeeding, or wish to become pregnant.

How should I take my benzodiazepine and what should I do if I miss a dose?

Look at your medicine bottle. It has your doctor's instructions on it. Follow these directions very carefully. Always take your dose with a full glass of water. Never be tempted to change the dose yourself. If you forget a dose, take the next one as soon as you remember, as long as it is only a few hours after the usual time.

What about alcohol?

It is recommended that people taking benzodiazepines should not drink alcohol. This is because both benzodiazepines and alcohol can cause drowsiness. If the two are taken at the same time, severe drowsiness can result. This can lead to falls or accidents. Once you are used to taking benzodiazepines, you can sometimes drink alcohol in small amounts without any harm. Avoid alcohol altogether for the first one or two months. After this, if you want a drink, try a glass of your normal drink and see how you feel. If this doesn't make you feel drowsy, then it is probably okay to drink small amounts. It pays to be very cautious because alcohol affects people in different ways, especially when they are taking medication.

Don't stop taking your medication because you fancy a drink. If you do drink alcohol, drink only small amounts. Never drink any alcohol and drive.

Discuss any concerns you may have with your doctor, nurse, case manager or pharmacist.

What about driving?

Benzodiazepines and zopiclone can impair your concentration, make you unable to focus, pay attention, slow reaction times, cause sleepiness, drowsiness, blurred vision, dizziness, slowed movement, fainting and rarely excitability. Do not drive if you have any of these symptoms. Before you consider driving anywhere while you are taking benzodiazepines or zopiclone, discuss this with your doctor.

The use of alcohol, other prescribed medications (including opioids) or illicit substance use (e.g. cannabis) in combination with benzodiazepines can significantly impair your concentration.

What does the law say about driving?

You are required by law to be mentally and physically fit to drive on public roads in New Zealand and it is an offence to drive while impaired after taking a medicine such as a benzodiazepine or zopiclone. The aim of this law is to make New Zealand roads safer. Where a police officer has "good cause to suspect" that a driver has consumed a drug or drugs (e.g. a benzodiazepine), the officer may require the driver to take a compulsory impairment test. Grounds for having good cause to suspect include erratic driving or, if the driver has been stopped for another reason, appearing to be under the influence of drugs. An example of the latter is the person stopped at an alcohol checkpoint who is behaving in an intoxicated manner but passes a breath alcohol test. If the driver does not satisfactorily complete the compulsory impairment test, the Police officer may forbid the driver to drive, and require the driver to provide a blood sample.

Are the benzodiazepines addictive?

If you take a benzodiazepine every day for more than about two or four weeks, you may get some withdrawal effects if you then stop them suddenly.

These may be like your original symptoms of anxiety but may be worse. Dependence does not happen if you take benzodiazepines every now and again, or only for a few weeks. Try and take them only when you think you need to. Discuss with your doctor when and how you should stop taking them.

Can I do anything else to help myself?

Yes. Many people join a self-help group. Listening to others who have had similar problems can often help. There are many books on anxiety and insomnia – ask your doctor. Relaxation and breathing exercises can usually help relieve tension. Ask your doctor, nurse, case manager or pharmacist for advice.

Side effect	What is it?	What should I do if this happens to me?
COMMON		
Ataxia	Being very unsteady on your feet.	Discuss with your doctor at your next visit.
Dizziness	Feeling light-headed and faint.	Don't stand up too quickly. Try and sit or lie down when you feel it coming on. Don't drive.
Drowsiness	Feeling sleepy or sluggish. It can last for a few hours after taking your dose.	Don't drive or use machinery. Ask your doctor if you can take your benzodiazepine at a different time.
RARE		
Aggression	Feeling excitable. You may be talkative or unfriendly.	Discuss with your doctor. He or she may want to change your dose.
Amnesia	Loss of memory or difficulty in remembering.	It is not dangerous. Discuss with your doctor if you are worried.
Confusion	Your mind is all mixed up.	Discuss with your doctor at your next visit.
Headache	When your head is pounding and painful.	It should be safe to take aspirin or paracetamol.
Hypotension	A low blood pressure. You may feel faint when you stand up.	Try not to stand up too quickly. If you feel dizzy, don't drive. This dizziness is not dangerous.
Rashes	Blotches seen anywhere.	Stop taking it and see your doctor now.

Remember, leaflets like this can only describe some of the effects of medication. You may also find other books or leaflets useful. If you have access to the internet, you may find a lot of information there as well, but be careful as internet-based information is not always accurate.

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