

## Minor Tranquillisers and Sleeping Tablets

Benzodiazepines are a group of medications which have been used since the 1960s to treat:

anxiety

epileptic seizures

mania

alcohol withdrawal

sleeping problems

They replaced the barbiturates which had been commonly prescribed for 50 years around the 1950s, but which were addictive and very dangerous in overdose.

They include:

Temazepam (Normison)

Nitrazepam (Mogadon)

Diazepam (Valium)

Lorazepam (Ativan)

Chloriazepoxide (Librium)

Those which have a short effect have been marketed as sleeping tablets – the idea being that you don't get a muzzy head the next day. Others with a longer effect have been marketed for their use in controlling anxiety. They all have similar side effects and withdrawal symptoms.

There has also been a big increase over the past 10 years in the prescribing of the newer non-benzodiazepine sleeping pills such as:

Zopiclone

Zolpidem

## Zaleplon

These newer drugs can cause side-effects and withdrawal symptoms that are every bit as bad as those caused by the benzodiazepines.

They all work in a similar way by boosting the effect of a substance in the brain – GABA (a neurotransmitter) – a chemical which is used in the brain to control the passage of impulses from one cell to another. GABA has a generally calming effect in the human brain.

side effects of taking these medications are:

Sleepiness

Unsteadiness

Memory problems

Benzodiazepines are potentially addictive drugs. Psychological and physical dependence can develop within a few weeks or months of regular or repeated use. The British National Formulary (BNF) recommend that these medications should be prescribed for 2-4 weeks only. They are highly addictive and their side effects and withdrawal symptoms can lead to breakdown and temporary mental illness. Effects of medium and long-term benzodiazepine use include agoraphobia, panic attacks, anxiety, confusion, poor quality of life and physical health. Abrupt or too rapid withdrawal can result in major convulsions which can be life threatening. Other severe withdrawal effects include acute psychotic reactions and hallucinations, delusions, paranoia and acute confusional states. Major depressive disorders and even suicide attempts may follow withdrawal after an interval. Recovery after complete withdrawal from benzodiazepines may take months or even years to complete.

### **HOW MANY PEOPLE ARE TAKING THEM?**

In 2010 community pharmacists dispensed approximately 11.5 million prescriptions for benzodiazepines. It has been estimated that there are around 1.5 million chronic users in England and Wales (i.e. people taking the drugs for 4 months or more). There has been a 29% increase in prescriptions for diazepam alone over the last 12 years.

## **WHAT IS THE OFFICIAL LINE?**

The Committee on Safety of Medicines issued advice to all prescribing doctors in 1988, stating that benzodiazepines were indicated only in the very short-term (2-4 weeks) and only for disabling anxiety and insomnia. Despite this some doctors are still prescribing benzodiazepines to new patients for indefinite periods. Nationally little has been done to reduce the huge numbers of people addicted, although particular efforts have been made in some areas (e.g. Bristol).

See also: [Withdrawing from Benzodiazepines](#)