



Facts About Benzodiazepines

What are benzodiazepines?

Benzodiazepines (benzos) are a type of drug that are usually prescribed to calm people down or help people to sleep. They are also called sleeping tablets.

Some common brand names of benzos include:

- ⊙ Alprazolam
- ⊙ Temazepam
- ⊙ Oxazepam
- ⊙ Diazepam
- ⊙ Clonazepam
- ⊙ Nitrazepam.

What does it look like?

Benzos usually come in the form of tablets or capsules.

How does it work?

Benzos are a depressant. They slow down the central nervous system and the messages travelling between the body and the brain. This makes people feel calm.

What are the short term effects of benzos?

In low to moderate doses benzos can cause:

- ⊙ relaxed muscles
- ⊙ slow pulse rate
- ⊙ a feeling of calmness
- ⊙ sleepiness
- ⊙ shallow breathing
- ⊙ dizziness
- ⊙ slurred speech
- ⊙ blurred vision
- ⊙ confusion
- ⊙ loss of balance and coordination
- ⊙ a hangover effect the following day.

What are the risks?

Using more than what has been prescribed or using benzos regularly (e.g. daily) for more than a few weeks can result in:

- ⊙ dependence (addiction)
- ⊙ aggression or violence, particularly if the dose is high, the person has a history of aggression, or has also been drinking alcohol
- ⊙ skin and vein problems (if injected)
- ⊙ withdrawals (these can lead to seizures and death if not managed correctly – see below)
- ⊙ blackouts
- ⊙ overdose (especially if the person combines benzos with depressants such as alcohol and heroin, or opioid painkillers).

What to do about an overdose

If a person has taken large amounts of benzos (alone or with alcohol or heroin), and is in trouble:

- ⊙ call an ambulance (000)
- ⊙ stay with them
- ⊙ place them in a coma position on their side.
- ⊙ If they have stopped breathing, CPR (cardiopulmonary resuscitation) should be given.

Dependence

A person can develop physical and/or psychological dependence on benzos. Physical dependence develops over time where more of the benzo is needed to achieve the same effect (tolerance). The person experiences withdrawal symptoms when use is stopped.



Withdrawal

Withdrawal symptoms can range from mild (sleep problems and anxiety) to life threatening (seizures) including:

- ⦿ feeling anxious, tense or agitated
- ⦿ having panic attacks
- ⦿ feeling dizzy
- ⦿ a metallic taste in the mouth
- ⦿ feeling down or depressed
- ⦿ an irregular heart rhythm (palpitations)
- ⦿ visual disturbances (seeing things moving when they're not)
- ⦿ uncontrollable twitches, muscle spasms or convulsions
- ⦿ difficulty sleeping
- ⦿ being over-sensitive to light, sound and touch
- ⦿ feeling confused
- ⦿ overheating and excessive sweating
- ⦿ experiencing symptoms of psychosis, (seeing things that aren't there, having strange thoughts or beliefs, feeling suspicious of people)
- ⦿ having epileptic fits or seizures (these can be fatal).

People wishing to stop their benzodiazepine use should talk to a GP about developing a plan to gradually reduce their dose and minimise the risk of withdrawal problems.

If you want help and support or are worried about someone's benzo use call the Alcohol and Drug Information Service (ADIS) in your state.

For telephone advice in cases of acute or chronic poisoning from prescription or non prescription drugs call the Poisons Information Centre, on 131 126 (24 hours, Australia wide service).

References

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