

We are here to support you



Chipping Surgery Benzodiazepine Information

You have been given this information to read because you are either about to start taking or are already taking a benzodiazepine or a Z drug.

Benzodiazepines and Z drugs are sometimes prescribed for short periods to ease symptoms of anxiety, sleeping difficulty and also occasionally for other reasons. A benzodiazepine or Z drug will often work well in the short term but is not normally advised for more than 2-4 weeks. If you take it for longer, the medication may lose its effect (you may become tolerant to the effect) and you may also become dependent on it (addicted to it). Sometimes the symptoms you are left with after long-term use of these medicines are worse than the symptoms for which they were originally given.

What happens if you use a benzodiazepine or Z drug for longer?

Tolerance

If you take a benzodiazepine or Z drug regularly, the helpful effect on easing anxiety or in helping sleep usually lasts for a few weeks. However, after a few weeks, the body and brain often become used to the benzodiazepine or Z drug. The medicine then gradually loses its effect. The initial dose then has little effect. You will then need a higher dose for it to work. In time, the higher dose does not work, and you need an even higher dose and so on. This effect is called tolerance.

Dependence (addiction)

There is a good chance that you will become dependent on a benzodiazepine or Z drug if you take it for more than four weeks. This means that withdrawal symptoms occur if the tablets are stopped suddenly. In effect, you need the medicine to feel normal. Possible withdrawal symptoms include:

- Psychological symptoms – such as anxiety, panic attacks, odd sensations, feeling as if you are outside your body, feelings of unreality, or just feeling awful. Rarely, a serious mental breakdown can occur.
- Physical symptoms such as sweating, being unable to sleep, headache, tremor, feeling sick, a ‘thumping heart’ feeling (palpitations), muscle spasms and being oversensitive to light, sound, and touch. Rarely convulsions occur.
- In some cases, the withdrawal symptoms seem like the original anxiety symptoms.

The duration of withdrawal symptoms varies but often lasts up to six weeks and sometimes longer. Withdrawal symptoms may not start for two days after stopping the tablet and tend to be worse in the first week or so. Some people have minor residual withdrawal symptoms for several months.

Therefore, you may end up taking the medicine to prevent withdrawal symptoms but because of tolerance, the medicine is no longer helping the original anxiety or sleeping problem. Note: you are unlikely to become dependent on a benzodiazepine or Z drug if you take it for a short period only.

How do these drugs work?

These drugs work by boosting the actions of GABA. GABA is a neurotransmitter in the brain that when stimulated causes an inhibitory action, this means that GABA has a general quietening influence on the brain. When GABA is stimulated by these drugs the brain's output of other neurotransmitters is reduced. A combination of these effects is what can produce adverse effects.

Adverse effects

Oversedation. Tolerance to sedation develops over a week or two so sleepiness can wear off, but fine judgement and memory may still be impaired.

Drug interactions. These drugs have addictive effects with other drugs that have sedative properties including antidepressants, painkillers, and alcohol.

Memory impairment. Retaining new information can be impaired partly due to lack of concentration and attention. They cause a specific problem in 'episodic' memory, the remembering of recent events, the circumstances in which they occurred and their sequence in time. Memory for words or phone numbers may not be impaired.

Benzodiazepines are often prescribed for acute stress-related reactions. At the time they may afford relief from the distress of catastrophic disasters, but if used for more than a few days they may prevent the normal psychological adjustment to such trauma.

Paradoxical stimulant effects. These drugs can occasionally cause excitement with increased anxiety, difficulty sleeping, nightmares, hallucinations, irritability, hyperactive or aggressive behaviour and worsening seizures in epileptics.

Depression, emotional blunting. These drugs may cause and aggravate depression. 'Emotional anaesthesia'. The inability to feel pleasure or pain is a common complaint of long-term users.

The elderly are more sensitive to the effects on the nervous system of these drugs.

Pregnancy. Benzodiazepines cross the placenta, and if taken regularly by the mother in late pregnancy, even in therapeutic doses, can cause neonatal complications. Chronic maternal use may impair foetal intrauterine growth and retard brain development. There is increasing concern that such children in later life may be prone to attention deficit disorder, hyperactivity, learning difficulties, and a spectrum of autistic disorders.

What happens if I stop taking these drugs?

If you have been taking these drugs for more than 3 weeks, then stopping abruptly can cause the risk of life threatening seizures.

As mentioned above you may experience withdrawal symptoms.

We would recommend that if you want to stop taking these drugs that you do so with advice from your GP. Quite often your GP may switch you to a different formulation which makes it easier to gradually reduce the dose over time. Depending on what dose you are taking, this process may take several months.

Driving

New laws now state that if you take the following drugs and have blood levels above normal therapeutic expected levels, you may be liable for prosecution as these drugs can impair judgement and can therefore be dangerous when driving. Please ask your GP if you need more information.

1. Clonazepam
 2. Diazepam
 3. Flunitrazepam
 4. Lorazepam
 5. Oxazepam
 6. Temazepam
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