



(A joint project between the
Rotary Club of Brisbane
Mid-City and DRUG ARM)

Benzodiazepines

What are Benzodiazepines?

The benzodiazepine group contains over 30 specific drugs. Each of these has a proper 'generic' name, and is sold under at least one trade name, with some sold under more than one name. The different trade names in each group are exactly the same drug, usually made by a different company. Pill packets or bottles usually have both the trade name (in big letters) and the drug name (in small letters) on the outside, but the label put on by the chemist usually only has the trade name. If in any doubt, as to whether a particular drug is a benzodiazepine, check with the prescribing doctor, or a pharmacist.

Common examples are:

Diazepam - marketed as Valium, Ducene, Pro-Pam and Antenex

Oxazepam - marketed as Serepax, Benzotran, Murelax and Alepam

Nitrazepam - marketed as Mogadon and Alodrom

Temazepam - marketed as Euhypnos and Normison

Why are they prescribed?

Benzodiazepines can all be prescribed to help people cope with grief or trauma, to help calm people and relieve anxiety or to help people sleep. They may be prescribed for days or weeks, depending on the particular drug, dosage, the characteristics of the patient and their circumstances.

Are they safe?

Like most drugs prescribed by a doctor, benzodiazepines are usually safe if taken for the recommended time and in the prescribed circumstances.

Some people find that benzodiazepines help them to function better in their life and this should not be a cause for concern, provided they consult their doctor regularly and stick to the prescribed dose.

Other people find benzodiazepines stop having beneficial effects after a period of time and may wish to stop taking them.

Dosage

There are as many dosages as there are drugs. The drugs come in different strengths, the number of tablets taken each day varies and the number of days or weeks for which people take them also varies.

It is misleading to look at the dosage in milligrams without knowing what is a normal dose for the drug. For example 5mg per day is a high dose of Ativan, a medium dose of Valium and a very low dose of Serepax. It is important to know whether someone is on a normal dose or an unusually high dose. Consulting a MIMS directory can often do this.

As a very rough guide, the standard tablets of each drug are more or less equivalent, and up to four tablets per day of a benzodiazepine will be a normal dose. People may become dependent even on a normal dose. If in any doubt, consult the prescribing doctor or a pharmacist.

Diet for good health

Although there are many aspects to withdrawal from benzodiazepines, one that is often overlooked is diet. Diet is not a replacement for professional medical supervision of withdrawal, but helps patients improve their overall health.



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A healthy diet is balanced and should include foods from all the four main food groups - bread and cereals, fruit and vegetables, proteins, dairy products. For more information on a healthy diet contact your local community health service.

People attempting to improve their health should avoid the use of cigarettes, alcohol and other drugs.

Natural tranquillisers

Professional medical supervision is essential for withdrawal from benzodiazepines. However, the following natural tranquillisers may be useful for patients undertaking withdrawal:

- Some herb teas: valerian, vervain, chamomile, peppermint and sleeping tea mixtures
- Lemon squeezed into water
- Oats - porridge, muesli
- Brown rice
- Celery and carrot juice
- Hot baths
- Bach flowers, especially Rescue Remedy
- Lavender oil - a few drops massaged around the head or on the pillow or in the bath
- Calcium - hot milk with honey before bed
- Brewer's yeast - a quarter of a teaspoon a day

Benzodiazepine withdrawal

Guidelines for Community Groups and Workers

It is recommended that people attempting to withdraw from benzodiazepines consult a general practitioner first.

Withdrawal symptoms will occur in about 40 percent of people, who have been using a benzodiazepine regularly for three or more months, when their intake is reduced or they stop taking the drug.

They can also occur in people who have been using them for shorter periods, sometimes as little as one to two weeks, though this is much less common.

The effects of withdrawal will vary according to the length of time a person has been taking a particular drug, and the dosage they were on. For example, withdrawal from the use of 5mg of Valium taken for a period of two weeks, three times a day will be much less severe than withdrawal from 60mg of Valium taken daily over two years.

Sudden, unsupervised withdrawal from high doses of benzodiazepines can be life threatening. Sudden withdrawal can cause seizures or delirium, and therefore should never be done outside hospital.

However low the dose, it is very common, almost universal, to have one or more nights of difficult, restless sleep, with unpleasant dreams, after stopping sleeping tablets of any kind, even if they were taken only for two or three nights.

References

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