

Patient Guide to Benzodiazepines

What are benzodiazepines (benzos)?

Benzodiazepines (also called “benzos”) are a type of medicine called sedatives or hypnotics. Benzodiazepines may be prescribed by your provider to help with anxiety or sleep problems (insomnia). They work by calming different parts of the brain to cover up the symptoms of anxiety or insomnia, but they do not solve the root cause of these problems.

You are taking a benzodiazepine if you are using any of the medications listed below:

- Alprazolam (Xanax®)
- Clorazepate (Tranxene-T®)
- Chlordiazepoxide
- Clobazam (Onfi®)
- Clonazepam
- (Klonopin®)
- Diazepam (Valium®)
- Estazolam
- Flurazepam
- Lorazepam (Ativan®)
- Oxazepam
- Quazepam (Doral®)
- Temazepam (Restoril®)
- Triazolam (Halcion®)

What are the side effects of benzodiazepines?

- Feeling drowsy or sleepy
- Headache
- Confusion
- Numb emotions
- Poor awareness of surroundings
- Muscle weakness
- Memory and concentration problems
- Tremor
- Problems with balance, swallowing, speaking, and vision

These side effects can increase your risk of accidents at work, while driving or at home. It also increases your risk of falling.

In general, how long should benzodiazepines be taken?

Benzodiazepines are only meant to be used generally for one week to one month to help with anxiety and insomnia.

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Can I become dependent on benzodiazepines?

Yes. Everyone will become dependent on benzodiazepines in as little as a few weeks of regular use. Dependence can lead to addiction in some people.

What does drug dependence mean?

Drug dependence means your body craves the drug. People who have drug dependence will experience uncomfortable symptoms if they do not take the drug. Anyone can become dependent on benzodiazepines, just like anyone can become dependent on alcohol, certain pain killers or street drugs.

What will get better when I stop taking benzodiazepines?

By trading benzodiazepines for other anxiety and stress reduction activities, talk therapy, support groups, or a combination of all three, you will no longer experience the side effects of the medications.

This means you will gain:

- More energy
- Improvements in memory and focus
- More awareness of what is happening around you
- More ability to participate in activities that interest you
- Reduced risk of falling and injuries from accidents

Will I feel bad when I start cutting back on my benzodiazepine dose?

No one feels 100% when they reduce their benzodiazepine doses. It is common to experience some withdrawal side effects (see below) during tapering. Those people who have been on these medicines for more than a month are more likely to experience the effects of withdrawal.

The good news is withdrawal symptoms can be very tolerable when a taper plan is individualized just for you and when you use relaxation activities, talk with a therapist and use other coping strategies.

How do I stop taking benzodiazepines?

Slowly and with the help of a provider. Talk to your provider or pharmacist to create a dose reduction plan. Dose reduction plans are also called “tapering.” Tapering involves working with a provider to slowly reduce your medicine dosage over a long period (weeks, months or even over a year).

It can also help to talk with a therapist, individual peer support providers or join a support group with others who are learning new ways of coping with stress and anxiety without the use of prescription medicine, drugs or alcohol. Please reach out to these supports if you feel like extra support would help.

Are there other medications that can treat anxiety?

Yes. There are daily medicines that do not cause dependence. Talk to your provider about this option.

What else should I know about stopping benzodiazepines?

- Trading benzodiazepines for cannabis, alcohol or other drugs will not reduce anxiety in the long term, and it can also lead to drug dependence.
- It is very important to be honest with your provider about how comfortable you are with each new dose reduction step. If you would rather wait to try the next dose reduction, tell your provider.

Benzodiazepine withdrawal symptoms

- Anxiety, nervousness
- Muscle stiffness
- Weakness (“jelly legs”)
- Stomach pain or nausea
- Flu-like symptoms
- Vision problems
- Insomnia, nightmares or sleep disturbances
- Dizziness
- Memory and concentration problems
- May get easily upset
- Seeing or hearing things (hallucinations)
- Tingling, numbness, unusual skin sensations
- Feel like you are in a dream

How do I deal with my anxiety without benzodiazepines?

There are many things you can do to help yourself relax when you feel anxious, tense or stressed. A good place to start is by doing the healthy activities that have helped you relax in the past. You may find some of your favorite things to do – or new things to try – in the list below.

This is not a complete list; you get to do what works best for you. If you choose to slowly stop your benzodiazepine, you may need to try a number of different activities. Try these activities more often or for a longer time to reduce the anxiety and feel more relaxed.

- Exercise (walking, running, biking, hiking)
- Taking a warm bath
- Journaling
- Stretching (yoga or athletic stretching)
- Listening to music
- Talking with friends
- Gardening
- Spending time with a pet
- Reading
- Making art (painting, drawing, coloring, crafts)
- Deep breathing
- Progressive muscle relaxation
- Mindfulness/meditation
- Spiritual or religious practices of your choice
- Other activities you like to do that help you relax: _____, _____, _____

Other ways to help anxiety are:

- Drink less caffeine
- Avoid alcohol and other drugs
- Eat a healthy diet with less fast food
- Spend time outdoors!

Additional supports:

Peer support specialists.

- [The David Romprey Warm Line](#) offers peer support counseling at 1-800-698-2392.
- Peer support specialists are also available in person through clinics and other organizations.

Phone and text-based support lines like those found at [Oregon's Lines for Life](#). Lines for Life offers multiple phone and chat options based on your specific needs, including the [Behavioral Health Support Line](#), which offers immediate access to screening, counseling services and referral to available mental health and substance use treatment.

- These lines are available 24/7 and are staffed by trained listeners who will offer you support without judgement or pressure.

What do I do if my anxiety feels overwhelming?

Many people find talk therapy helps them learn ways to manage anxious thoughts and feelings. One of the types of talk therapy that works well is called “CBT” or “cognitive behavioral therapy.” This type of therapy helps you learn how to challenge your thinking about the situations that make you anxious. Talk therapists gently guide you through this learning process and, over time, the anxious thoughts and feelings don't feel as powerful and don't lead to as much anxiety.

Other types of talk therapy are helpful, too! More important than the type of therapy offered by a talk therapist is how comfortable you feel with them and if you feel like you are feeling better from your time together.

Example benzodiazepine tapering schedule

This schedule is only an example. Work with your provider to come up with a plan that works for you. It takes a long time to come off a benzodiazepine. It's okay to take your time. Your schedule may be shorter or longer than the example below.

Be sure to talk to your doctor or pharmacist before stopping your benzodiazepine. Together, you can come up with a good plan!

WEEKS	TAPERING SCHEDULE							✓
	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday	Sunday	
1-2								
3-4								
5-6								
7-8								
9-10								
11-12								
13-14								
15-16	X		X	X		X		
17-18	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	

EXPLANATIONS



Full Dose



Half Dose



Quarter Dose

X No Dose

You can get this document in other languages, large print, braille or a format you prefer. Contact Oregon Prescription Drug Program, Amanda Parish at 503-383-8142 or email amanda.b.parish@dhsosha.state.or.us.

We accept all relay calls or you can dial 711.



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