

# BENZODIAZEPINES: THE FACTS

## WHAT ARE BENZODIAZEPINES?

Benzodiazepines are a group of drugs called minor tranquillisers, often known as benzos. These drugs are prescribed by a doctor to help people with anxiety or sleep problems.

There are about 30 different types (generic names) of benzodiazepines. Each one of these generic drugs may be sold under several different brand names – all the same drug, but made by different companies.

[See table in this fact sheet.]

Some slang names for benzodiazepines include benzos, rowies, serries, moggies, vals, V, normies, downers, tranks and sleepers. Some people use benzodiazepines without a prescription from a doctor. This is illegal and can be very dangerous.

## HOW ARE BENZODIAZEPINES USED?

Benzodiazepines are depressants that slow down the workings of the brain and the central nervous system. They are used medically to reduce anxiety and to help people sleep. They should only be prescribed by a health professional for short periods of time as it is possible to become dependent on them after as little as two weeks regular (eg daily) use. (See 'Tolerance and dependence' in this fact sheet).

Different types of benzodiazepines work in the body for different lengths of time. They come in the form of tablets or capsules and some are available for intravenous use in hospital settings. These are a very dangerous group of drugs when taken in high doses and/or mixed with other drugs and can cause an overdose or death.

Some people inject benzodiazepines and/or use them at the same time as they use heroin, alcohol or other drugs. Injecting benzodiazepines, which are intended to be swallowed in tablet/capsule form, can also cause severe damage to veins, leading to loss of limbs from poor blood circulation, organ damage or stroke.

## EFFECTS OF BENZODIAZEPINES

The effects of benzodiazepines depend on:

- the type of benzodiazepines
- how many tablets and what strength you take
- how often/ long you have been taking them
- your height and weight
- your general health
- your mood
- your past experience with benzodiazepines
- whether you use benzodiazepines on their own or with other drugs
- method of use.

### IMMEDIATE EFFECTS

The effects of benzodiazepines may last from a few hours to a few days, depending on the dose and type of benzodiazepines you take.

It is possible to be affected by benzodiazepines and not be aware.

The immediate effects can include that you:

- feel relaxed / reduced anxiety
- feel drowsy, sleepy or tired
- have no energy
- become confused or dizzy
- feel good
- have mood swings
- slur your words or stutter
- cannot judge distances or movement properly
- have blurred or double vision

- cannot remember things from just a short time ago
- do risky things that you would not normally do
- may impair your capacity as a parent/ primary carer of children.

If you take a very high dose of benzodiazepines and / or take it with other drugs you can go into a coma or die.

### LONG TERM EFFECTS

Benzodiazepines are highly addictive. If you use benzodiazepines often and for a long time (more than two to three weeks), you may:

- have increased risk of injury from falls and accidents
- have no energy or interest in doing every day activities
- be cranky
- feel sick in the stomach
- have headaches
- have dreams that make you feel bad
- experience fatigue or drowsiness
- lose interest in sex, or your body won't work properly during sex
- get skin rashes
- be more hungry and put on weight
- have menstrual problems (women)
- be depressed
- experience unpleasant withdrawal effects
- have memory and concentration problems

The way a person uses benzodiazepines can also cause problems:

- Injecting benzodiazepines that are intended to be swallowed in tablet/capsule form can cause severe damage to veins, leading to loss of limbs from poor blood circulation, or to organ damage or stroke.
- Using benzodiazepines at the same time as other central nervous system depressants (sedative drugs) – such as alcohol, heroin, methadone, or some prescribed drugs – is very dangerous. It can cause muscle damage, cause you to become unconscious, stop or slow your breathing, put you into a coma or cause you to die.
- Injecting benzodiazepines with unsterile injecting equipment makes you more likely to get blood poisoning (septicaemia) and skin abscesses (sores with pus).
- NEVER share fits (needles and syringes), spoons, water, filters, alcohol swabs or tourniquets. Sharing injecting equipment makes you more likely to contract blood born viruses such as HIV, hepatitis Band C. In NSW, free sterile injecting equipment is available from Needle and Syringe Program (NSP) outlets and from selected pharmacists. Call the Alcohol and Drug Information Service (ADIS) for the nearest NSP outlet.
- Tell your doctor about any other drugs you are taking so they can give you the right type and dose of benzodiazepines. This will help to prevent the risk of different drugs affecting each other in your body.

## MIXING WITH OTHER DRUGS

Using benzodiazepines at the same time as any other drug, including alcohol, can be dangerous. Mixing benzodiazepines with other drugs that slow down the body (eg alcohol, sleeping pills, heroin, cannabis), can:

- make it harder to think clearly
- make it harder to properly control how you move
- stop your breathing and cause death.

## DRINK SPIKING

Drink spiking is when a person deliberately adds benzodiazepines or another drug (eg. GHB) to another person's drink without their knowledge – this could make the person become intoxicated unexpectedly. Drinks are spiked for amusement, to facilitate sexual assault, rape or theft.

If your drink has been spiked:

- ask someone you trust to get you to a safe place
- ask your doctor to test for the presence of drugs which can be identified through urine or blood tests within 24 hours.

If you feel unwell or suspect that you have been sexually assaulted then call an ambulance or go to the nearest NSW Health Sexual Assault service or Emergency Department.

Drink spiking is serious and illegal. To prevent drink spiking, it may be best to watch your drink, avoid sharing drinks, buy/pour your own drink and don't accept drinks from people you don't know well or trust.

## WITHDRAWAL

People who are dependent on benzodiazepines find it very hard to stop using them or cut down because of withdrawal symptoms. It is dangerous to suddenly stop using benzodiazepines. Seek medical advice about how to withdraw gradually if you have been using benzodiazepines in higher doses or for a prolonged period.

Symptoms of withdrawal can include:

- disturbed sleep
- feeling nervous or tense
- being confused or depressed

- panicking and feeling anxious
- feeling afraid or thinking other people want to hurt you
- feeling distant or not connected with other people or things
- sharpened or changed senses (eg noises seem louder than usual)
- shaking
- convulsions
- pain, stiffness or muscle aches or spasms
- flu-like symptoms
- heavier menstrual bleeding and breast pain (women)
- 'pins and needles' in the limbs
- ringing in the ears, blurred vision.

## BENZODIAZEPINE RELATED EMERGENCY

If you can't wake someone up or you are concerned that they may have sustained a head injury from a drug related fall – call an ambulance immediately – dial **Triple Zero (000)**.

If the person has been mixing benzodiazepines with other drugs, tell the NSW Ambulance paramedic exactly what they have taken. Paramedics are there to help. Generally paramedics don't involve the police **unless** there is danger to themselves or other people/children, someone dies, or a crime (such as violence or theft) has been committed.

## OVERDOSE

If you use benzodiazepines with other drugs such as alcohol, heroin or methadone it is very easy to overdose and die. Signs of overdose are:

- person is unable to be roused or woken
- coma
- very slow breathing
- slow heartbeat
- cold clammy skin
- lips may appear bluish.

If someone overdoses, other people with them should:

- phone **Triple Zero (000)** to get an

ambulance and tell the operator that the person has overdosed (**the police will not come unless someone dies**)

- stay with the person
- try not to panic
- try to keep the person awake – talk to them, use their name (don't use force)
- if the person is unconscious, put them on their left side, in the recovery position
- clear their airway, check their breathing
- do mouth-to-mouth resuscitation immediately if they stop breathing.

## TOLERANCE AND DEPENDENCE

Anyone can develop a tolerance to benzodiazepines or other drugs. Tolerance means that you must take more of the drug to feel the same effects you used to have with smaller amounts or lower doses. This may happen very quickly with benzodiazepines.

Dependence on benzodiazepines means that these drugs take up a lot of your thoughts, emotions and activities. You spend a lot of time thinking about using benzodiazepines, looking for them, using them and getting over

the effects of using them.

You also find it difficult to stop using or control how much you use. Dependence can lead to a variety of health, money, legal, work and relationship problems.

Not all people who ever use benzodiazepines become dependent. But it is very easy to become dependent on benzodiazepines and it can happen within two to four weeks.

## PREGNANCY AND BREASTFEEDING

Benzodiazepines taken during pregnancy cross the cord to the unborn baby. High doses can cause the baby to be born with poor muscle tone, poor feeding ability, breathing problems, drowsiness and low body temperature.

New babies of mothers who use benzodiazepines are more likely to be sick in the first few weeks of life and later have withdrawal symptoms.

Do not stop using benzodiazepines abruptly. Tell your doctor, midwife or the health professional managing your pregnancy if you are using benzodiazepines. They will be able to help you care for your baby.

It is generally risky to take any drug while breastfeeding without medical advice.

Taking benzodiazepines while on methadone makes neonatal abstinence (withdrawal) more severe for babies.

# DRIVING UNDER THE INFLUENCE OF BENZODIAZEPINES

Benzodiazepines slow down the workings of your brain and your body, so they may make you drive dangerously. Any dose of benzodiazepines may affect your driving, and if you have any concerns, consult your doctor. You should not drive if you have not taken benzodiazepines before, are on a large dose or have recently increased your dose. If in doubt, check with your doctor.

It is illegal to drive under the influence of drugs, including benzodiazepines. Penalties include losing your licence, a fine and/or jail. Anyone under the influence of drugs who kills or injures another person while driving can be sentenced to a term in prison.

## SELF-HELP ASSOCIATIONS

**Narcotics Anonymous Australia**, a non profit fellowship or society of recovering addicts who meet regularly to help each other stay clean via a program of complete abstinence from all drugs. Visit [www.na.org.au](http://www.na.org.au)

[www.reconnexion.org.au](http://www.reconnexion.org.au) provides counselling, telephone support and information services (1300 273 266) to address the challenges of anxiety, stress, depression and benzodiazepine (tranquillisers and sleeping pills) dependency and related conditions.

**Smart Recovery** is a voluntary self-help group that assists people in recovering from alcohol, drug use and other addictive behaviours. Visit [www.smartrecoveryaustralia.com.au](http://www.smartrecoveryaustralia.com.au)

## TABLE OF GENERIC AND BRAND NAMES

The table below shows some of the different generic and brand names of benzodiazepines.

Drug Name	Brand Name
Diazepam	Valium, Ducene, Antenex, Valpam
Oxazepam	Serepax, Murelax, Alepam
Nitrazepam	Mogadon, Alodorm
Temazepam	Normison, Temaze, Temtabs
Lorazepam	Ativan
Flunitrazepam	Rohypnol, Hypnodorm
Bromazepam	Lexotan
Clonazepam	Rivotril, Paxam
Alprazolam	Xanax, Kalma

## THE LAW

Using benzodiazepines without a prescription from a doctor, or keeping, selling or giving them to someone else is illegal. If you are caught you could face substantial fines and penalties including a prison sentence.

## INFORMATION AND ADVICE

For free and confidential advice about alcohol and other drugs 24 hours, 7 days a week, call the **National Alcohol and Other Drug hotline: 1800 250 015**.

It will automatically direct you to the Alcohol and Drug Information Service in the state or territory you are calling from.

**Your room** provides drug and alcohol information and advice, campaigns and resources. Visit [www.yourroom.com.au](http://www.yourroom.com.au)

**Aboriginal Health and Medical Research Council** provides links to Aboriginal community controlled health services across NSW. Visit [www.ahmrc.org.au](http://www.ahmrc.org.au) for information about AHMRC members including a regional map, information and links to members websites.

**Drug and Alcohol Multicultural Education Centre (DAMEC)** provides services for people from culturally and linguistically diverse communities. Contact DAMEC on (02) 8113 1301 or for counselling and support services for CALD communities call (02) 8706 0150.

**Drug Info** provides facts and resources on alcohol and other drugs and the prevention of related harm. Visit [www.druginfo.adf.org.au](http://www.druginfo.adf.org.au)

**State Library of New South Wales Drug Info** provides up to date information on alcohol and other drugs in public libraries throughout NSW. Visit [www.druginfo.sl.nsw.gov.au](http://www.druginfo.sl.nsw.gov.au)

**eheadspace** provides mental health and wellbeing support, information and services for young people (12 - 25 years) and their family and friends. Visit [www.eheadspace.org.au](http://www.eheadspace.org.au)

**Family Drug Support** provides 24-7 telephone support to families in crisis due to drug and alcohol issues. Call the Helpline on 1300 368 186 or visit [www.fds.org.au](http://www.fds.org.au)

**Kids Helpline** is a free, 24 hour counselling service for young people aged 5 to 25 years. Counselling is offered via the Kids Helpline website [www.kidshelp.com.au](http://www.kidshelp.com.au) or email, or call 1800 55 1800.

**Nepean Youth Drug and Alcohol Service (NYDAS)** works within a holistic model of care to address a range of issues for young people (12 - 20 years of age) related to their alcohol and other drug use. Call (02) 4734 2129 or (02) 4734 1333.

**NSW Users and AIDS Association (NUAA)** is a peak drug user organisation in NSW providing harm reduction information and blood borne virus prevention peer education. Visit [www.nuaa.org.au](http://www.nuaa.org.au)

**Poisons Information Centre** is a 24/7 call centre service available across Australia. Call 13 11 26.

**ReachOut** is an Australian online youth mental health service with a mobile-friendly site and forums where you can access help, information and support. Visit [au.reachout.com](http://au.reachout.com)

**Sexual Health Info Link** provides free and confidential sexual health support and information. Visit [www.shil.nsw.gov.au](http://www.shil.nsw.gov.au)

**TAFE NSW** provides help with education, career development or personal matters. Students can contact a local TAFE/university counsellor. Visit [www.tafensw.edu.au](http://www.tafensw.edu.au)

**Youth Action** is the peak organisation for young people in NSW. Visit [www.youthaction.org.au](http://www.youthaction.org.au) and use the search option to access a directory of NSW youth services.

**Youth Solutions** provides services for young people 12 to 25 years of age and the community including prevention and health promotion, drug and alcohol education, community programs and information and referral. Visit [www.youthsolutions.com.au](http://www.youthsolutions.com.au) or call (02) 4628 2319 [provides services to young people in Macarthur & Wingecarribee].

**NSW Health aims to reduce drug-related harm for individuals and the community by providing the facts, including the possible health, social and economic consequences of using alcohol and other drugs.**

A range of drug and alcohol fact sheets is available to download at: [www.yourroom.com.au](http://www.yourroom.com.au)

