



MADERA COUNTY BEHAVIORAL HEALTH SERVICES

BENZODIAZEPINES

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.. **What are benzodiazepines?**

Benzodiazepines are a group of drugs called minor tranquilizers. In the psychiatric field, these drugs are prescribed to help people with severe anxiety, panic disorder and symptoms of alcohol/drug withdrawal.

There are about 30 different types (generic names) of benzodiazepines and each generic name drug may be sold under several different Brand names—all the same drug, but made by different companies. The list below shows some of the different generic and Brand names of benzodiazepines:

- * Triazolam – Halcion
- * Zolpidem – Ambien
- * Alprazolam – Xanax
- * Diazepam – Valium, Ducene
- * Temazepam – Restoril, Temaze
- * Lorazepam – Ativan
- * Flunitrazepam – Damlane, Hypnodorm
- * Clonazepam – Klonopin, Rivotril

.. **How are benzodiazepines used?**

Benzodiazepines are depressants and slow down the workings of the brain and the central nervous system. Research supports the use of benzodiazepines for short term use to reduce severe anxiety, to help people with insomnia and with alcohol withdrawal symptoms. Long term use is not recommended because of the potential for abuse, dependence, toxicity, and lethal withdrawal symptoms.

.. **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 it takes 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. It is easy to become dependent on benzodiazepines.

•• **Typical side effects of long term use**

Emotional:

- Mood swings
- Anxiety in general and anxiety attacks
- Depression
- Low frustration tolerance, irritability and crankiness
- Quick emotional reactivity and volatility/temper
- Feeling dissociated or like the world is not real
- Feelings of turmoil
- Inability to experience or express feelings
- Loss of self-confidence

Physical:

- Non-restorative sleep, restless/poor sleep, bad dreams, waking up tired
- Chronic fatigue, drowsiness
- Feeling off balance, clumsy movements, falls
- Chronic headaches, feel sick in the stomach, blurred vision
- More hungry and put on weight
- Menstrual problems
- Body doesn't work properly during sex
- Effects the growth and development of the fetus if used during pregnancy

Thought:

- Short-term memory problems especially in learning new material
- Confusion, disorientation, forgetfulness
- Difficulty with abstract reasoning
- Problems with attention/focus/concentration

Relationships:

- Loss of interest in leisure pursuits and hobbies
- Difficulty expressing thoughts and emotions
- Agitation/irritability especially in daily interactions with close relationships
- Agoraphobia and social phobia
- Loss of sex drive
- Difficulty understanding accurately one's own emotions in social situations or interpreting others' emotions

•• **Interference with psychiatric treatment**

Psychological therapies such as cognitive behavioral therapy are recommended as a first-line therapy for panic disorder. According to the National Collaborating Center for Primary Care, benzodiazepines use interferes with therapeutic gains from these therapies. Although antidepressants have a longer onset of action compared to benzodiazepines, they are considered the best agents for long term treatment of anxiety disorders.

.. The Law

Using benzodiazepines without a prescription from a doctor, or keeping, selling or giving them to someone else is illegal. If caught, you could face substantial fines and penalties including a prison sentence. It is illegal to drive under the influence of drugs, including benzodiazepines if used illegally.

Behavioral Health Services (BHS) Prescribing Guidelines

All BHS psychiatrists are required to follow these guidelines:

- Generally, benzodiazepines will be prescribed only as short term “bridge” medication until other treatments are given a chance to be effective.
- Benzodiazepines should not be substituted for proper use of other forms of psychotherapy including brief cognitive and behavioral therapies recognized as effective treatments of first choice.
- Generally, benzodiazepines should not be prescribed to individuals with mental disorders associated with abuse of medications, alcohol or illicit drugs.
- Generally, benzodiazepines should not be prescribed for cognitive impairment or for individuals in who unimpaired cognitive and psychomotor function is critical (such as individuals operating motor vehicles or other heavy equipment).
- Only one benzodiazepine medication should be used at any one time.
- Dosage should be determined by clinical situation. Generally, clients should be maintained at the lowest effective dose and within medically accepted dosage ranges.
- Benzodiazepine prescriptions are limited to a ≤ 30 day supply.
- Early refills of benzodiazepines are not provided.
- Psychiatrists are required to consult with the Medical Director to prescribe benzodiazepines above the FDA maximum recommended dosage for approved indications.
- Laboratory monitoring of individuals taking benzodiazepines should be determined by the clinical situation.
- When tapering clients off benzodiazepines, an approved protocol for gradually weaning must be followed and clients never suddenly stopped.

You are strongly encouraged to consult with your psychiatrist if you have questions or concerns regarding your treatment.

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