

Understanding benzodiazepines.

1800 700 514 (Freecall)
unitingvictas.org.au/aod

What are benzodiazepines?

Benzodiazepines (often called benzos) are a group of drugs prescribed by doctors to relieve anxiety and stress, to help people sleep and to manage epileptic seizures. They're also used in the treatment of withdrawal from alcohol and some other drugs. Some common benzos include diazepam (Valium), temazepam, oxazepam, and alprazolam (Xanax). While some people might be prescribed these medications, others get them without consulting a health professional.

Common effects include:

- Calmness
- Reduced anxiety
- Help with sleep
- Muscle relaxation
- Help to come down off other substances

Negative effects include:

- Headaches
- Dry mouth
- Confusion
- Blurred vision
- Impaired thinking
- Memory loss
- Poor physical coordination
- Tolerance can form quickly (2-4 weeks)
- Depression
- Dizziness and tremors

Benzos are typically taken orally. If injected there is significant risk of scarring, infections and blood clots.

Avoid mixing substances

Benzos are a depressant drug, meaning they slow down the central nervous system to relax muscles and relieve stress. They interact with other depressants like alcohol or opioids, making their effects significantly stronger. This can lead to blackouts, overdoses or even death.

Additionally, benzos can mask the effects of stimulants like amphetamines or cocaine. This doesn't mean those other drugs stop working though, and you might experience the 'upper' and the 'downer' effects together. Watch for imitation pills sold as benzos on the black market. These contain a mix of substances and can be harmful.

Cutting down or quitting

If you notice the negative effects of using benzodiazepines are impacting your life, it might be time to cut back.

Tips for cutting down:

- Speak with your doctor about reducing your dose
- Ask your doctor about longer-acting benzos such as diazepam
- Take them at the same time and in the same dose each day
- Keep a record of how much you take and when. This can help you to gradually cut down.

Calming strategies:

If you're taking benzos to manage anxiety and occasional panic attacks, it can be helpful to practise deep breathing techniques. When you slow down your breathing you send a signal to your brain that you are safe and there is no need to panic or be anxious. Try doing this for a few minutes before considering taking a tablet. This might mean you don't need it, or that you might want to take less.

The future is bright.



Withdrawal

If you have decided to stop using benzos, it's important that you plan carefully and get support. The withdrawal symptoms won't last forever. Common symptoms you can expect:

Early withdrawal (first few days)	Tremors, return of anxiety, depression, insomnia and other issues that the benzos were managing or masking.
Acute withdrawal (1-4 weeks)	Above symptoms as well as agitation, anger, irritability, hallucinations, panic attacks, poor memory and focus, and intrusive or suicidal thoughts. People also experience dizziness, fatigue, flu-like symptoms, headaches, and changes in digestion.
Extended withdrawal (months or years after)	A small number of people experience the above symptoms occasionally, or coming on suddenly, a long time after stopping.

Understanding the risks of withdrawal

Withdrawal seizures are uncommon but dangerous. They're most likely to occur within the first 1-2 days after stopping taking benzos. If you're taking benzos regularly or in high doses, it's important you don't suddenly stop without seeking medical advice. You may need supporting medication as well as help from people who can monitor your symptoms.

Contacts

If you want to talk to someone about your own or someone else's alcohol or other drug use, you can get more information from these Victorian and Tasmanian state-wide services. If you are located in another state, these contacts will direct you to your local support services:

DirectLine

24/7 service offering counselling, information and referrals

T 1800 888 236

directline.org.au

Harm Reduction Victoria

Support and information from other drug using peers.

T 03 9329 1500

hrvic.org.au

Family Drug and Gambling Help

Victorian support for family members.

T 1300 660 068

sharc.org.au/sharc-programs/family-drug-gambling-help

QUIT

T 13 78 48

quit.org.au

Drug alerts

health.vic.gov.au/alcohol-and-drugs/drug-alerts

Alcohol Tobacco and Other Drugs Tasmania Service Directory

atdc.org.au/service-directory

Alcohol and Drug Information Service TAS

24/7 service offering counselling, information and referrals.

T 1800 811 994

Uniting would like to thank consumer partners for drawing on their lived experience to contribute to this series of publications.

