

Benzodiazepine Misuse

Understanding the effects, the risks and where to get help

Benzodiazepines are medicines that can be prescribed for problems such as severe anxiety, acute distress, muscle spasm or seizures, depending on the drug and clinical situation. Examples include diazepam, lorazepam and temazepam. They can be useful medicines, but regular use can lead to tolerance and physical dependence. Misuse may involve taking more than prescribed, taking somebody else's medication, using it for a different effect, obtaining additional supplies, or combining it with other substances in unsafe ways.

Signs the pattern may have changed

Possible signs include taking doses earlier or more often than intended; increasing the amount without medical advice; running out early; feeling unable to cope, sleep or leave home without the medicine; becoming preoccupied with the next dose; using medication to numb feelings; memory gaps; daytime sedation; falls or poor coordination; hiding use; or experiencing marked symptoms when a dose is delayed. Physical dependence can occur even when medication has been taken exactly as prescribed.

Tolerance, dependence and withdrawal

Tolerance Over time the same dose may feel less effective. Increasing the dose without a clinical review can increase risk.	Physical dependence The nervous system adapts to regular benzodiazepine exposure. Dependence is not the same as addiction.
Withdrawal Symptoms can include anxiety, insomnia, agitation, tremor, sweating, sensory sensitivity and other physical or psychological symptoms.	Addiction / problematic use Some people develop craving, loss of control or continued use despite harm. Support should address the person's needs as well as the medicine.

Do not stop benzodiazepines abruptly

Suddenly stopping after regular use can be dangerous. Severe withdrawal can include confusion, hallucinations and seizures. Do not create your own rapid taper or make a major dose reduction without appropriate medical advice. A prescriber or GP can assess the medicine, dose, duration, other substances and individual circumstances and agree a safer plan. Some people need a slow, individualised reduction.

Mixing substances increases risk

Benzodiazepines cause sedation and can impair memory, judgement, balance and coordination. Combining them with alcohol, opioids or other sedating medicines can greatly increase the risk of profound sedation, breathing problems, unconsciousness and overdose. Tell a clinician or emergency service what has been taken if you know; accurate information helps them provide safer care.

Urgent warning signs

Call **999** if someone cannot be woken, is unconscious, has very slow or difficult breathing, has a seizure, collapses, becomes severely confused, or you suspect a serious overdose. If opioids may also be involved and naloxone is available, use it according to its instructions while emergency help is on the way.

A safer first conversation

Write down the benzodiazepine name, prescribed dose, what you actually take, how long you have taken it, any missed-dose symptoms, and all other medicines, alcohol or substances used. You can tell your GP or prescriber: 'I am worried I may be dependent on this medication and I want to review it safely.' You do not need to decide in advance whether your experience should be called dependence, misuse or addiction.

Benzodiazepine Misuse - Support and Recovery

Safe medication review, practical support and UK routes to help

Where to get help in the UK

GP / prescriber	The safest starting point for regular benzodiazepine use is often a medication review. Give an accurate account of dose, duration, symptoms and other substances or medicines.
Community pharmacist	A pharmacist can explain prescribed use, interactions, sedation risks and when symptoms require medical assessment. Dose changes should still be agreed with the appropriate prescriber.
Local drug & alcohol service	Community services can support difficulties involving prescribed, non-prescribed or illicit benzodiazepines. Many areas allow self-referral.
FRANK	Confidential UK drug information and advice. Helpline: 0300 123 6600 ; text 82111 . FRANK also provides information about local support.
UK SMART Recovery	Free peer-support meetings with practical tools for managing urges, motivation and behaviour change. Online and face-to-face options are available.
NHS 111 / 999	Use NHS 111 for urgent medical advice where available. Call 999 for a seizure, severe breathing problem, collapse, unconsciousness or suspected serious overdose.

Look underneath the medication pattern

Ask: **What was the benzodiazepine originally helping me with? What makes me reach for it now? What happens if a dose is late? What am I frightened might happen if the medicine changes? What other support would I need?** Anxiety, panic, trauma, sleep difficulties, sensory overload and fear of withdrawal can all become part of the picture. A safer plan needs to acknowledge those needs rather than focusing only on the tablet.

Supporting somebody else

Do not confiscate benzodiazepines or pressure a physically dependent person to stop suddenly. Encourage an honest medical review and offer practical help such as writing down medication details or attending an appointment if invited. Keep boundaries around sharing prescriptions, driving while sedated, money and safety. If the person is unconscious, having a seizure or struggling to breathe, call 999.

One book to explore

***The Maudsley Deprescribing Guidelines: Antidepressants, Benzodiazepines, Gabapentinoids and Z-drugs* - Mark Horowitz and David Taylor.** This is a clinical reference rather than a simple self-help book. I include it because it takes withdrawal seriously and explains why deprescribing may need to be gradual and individualised. It can help readers understand the principles behind safer conversations with clinicians. It should not be used to design an unsupervised tapering schedule.

A message from Maggie

If a medicine that once helped has become something you are frightened to miss, that can feel incredibly complicated. You may be dealing with the original anxiety or sleep problem, physical dependence, fear of withdrawal and worry about being judged all at once. You deserve a conversation that takes all of that seriously. Asking for a safe medication review is a valid first step. You do not have to suddenly stop, prove you are 'addicted', or manage the process alone.

Clinical note

This guide is educational and does not provide an individual tapering schedule. Benzodiazepine withdrawal can be medically serious. Medication changes should be discussed with an appropriately qualified clinician. Risks vary with the specific drug, dose, duration, health conditions and other medicines or substances used. Service details can change and should be checked before publication.