



Benzodiazepines

What are benzodiazepines?

Benzodiazepines are a group of medications that have a sedative effect. They may be prescribed to assist with severe anxiety and distress. Benzodiazepines may also be used in the short-term management of insomnia.

While you are in hospital, benzodiazepines may be used to assist in the management of problems such as psychosis, depression, mania and anxiety. They are not the main treatment for these problems, but can help to relieve some of the associated agitation and sleep difficulties. They do not replace other medications that your doctor may have prescribed such as antipsychotics, antidepressants and mood stabilisers.

Different types of benzodiazepines work in the body for different lengths of time. Most benzodiazepines come as a tablet preparation that is taken orally, although some benzodiazepines are given as an injection.

Some of the common benzodiazepines are shown in the table below.

Medication Name	Brand Names
Diazepam	Valium™, Ducene™, Antenex™
Oxazepam	Serepax™, Murelax™, Alepam™
Nitrazepam	Mogadon™, Alodorm™
Temazepam	Temaze™, Normison™

Published: November 2009.

Lorazepam	Ativan™
Clonazepam	Rivotril™, Paxam™
Alprazolam	Xanax™, Kalma™, Alprax™
Midazolam	Hypnovel™

How do they work?

Benzodiazepines enhance the effect of a chemical messenger in the brain known as GABA that helps you to feel calmer.

How long do they take to work?

This will vary depending on the particular benzodiazepine that you have been given, but most will have a calming effect within a few minutes of taking the medication.

What are the possible side-effects?

Other than sedation, some of the more common side-effects include:

- Light-headedness
- Confusion
- Unsteadiness on feet
- Memory problems

What else should I know?

Benzodiazepines can be a very effective part of your treatment when used for short periods. However, problems can develop if you are taking benzodiazepines on a regular basis for more than a few weeks. Continuing regular use can lead to psychological and physical addiction.

It is important to let your doctor know if you have been taking benzodiazepines on a regular basis, as stopping them abruptly can potentially lead to a serious withdrawal syndrome. The symptoms of this withdrawal can range from feeling anxious and uneasy in mild withdrawal to becoming acutely confused and possibly having a seizure in severe withdrawal.

Benzodiazepines can interact with some medications leading to increased sedation (drowsiness). Drinking alcohol while taking benzodiazepines will also increase their sedative effects. So it is important to avoid alcohol when taking benzodiazepine medications and to consult your doctor about drug interactions if you are starting other medicines while taking a benzodiazepine.

The sedative effects of benzodiazepines can slow you down and impair your ability to perform complex tasks such as driving a car or operating machinery. You should not drive or operate machinery until these effects have worn off.

This brochure contains general information and does not include all possible side effects or all brand names of medications.

SYDNEY SOUTH WEST
AREA HEALTH SERVICE
NSW HEALTH
Mental Health Services