

Stopping your medicine: benzodiazepines and z-drugs.

A guide for patients

What are benzodiazepines and z-drugs, and why are they used?

Benzodiazepines are a group of medicines that can be prescribed for short periods to help with sleeping problems or to help with episodes of severe anxiety. Examples include temazepam and nitrazepam for sleeping problems, and diazepam and lorazepam for anxiety.

Z-drugs act in a similar way to benzodiazepines and are used to help with sleeping problems. Examples of z-drugs are zolpidem and zopiclone.

Benzodiazepines and z-drugs are only available on prescription and must only be taken by the person they were prescribed for.

Benzodiazepines and z-drugs often work well for a short period of two to four weeks, but if you use them for longer, the medicine may lose its effect and you may become dependent on it.

What are the side effects of taking benzodiazepines and z-drugs?

Benzodiazepines and z-drugs act on the brain and may therefore:

- affect your memory and concentration
- make you feel confused or irritable
- make you feel drowsy
- make you more likely to have a fall
- make you more likely to have an accident, either at home, work or in the car.

Why should I stop taking my benzodiazepines or z-drug?

There are many good reasons why you should stop taking your benzodiazepine or z drug:

- If you have used it for a long time and the medicine has lost its effect, it will no longer help with the condition you are taking it for
- You may become, or may have already become, dependent on it. If you stop, you will have fewer side effects, so you will be:
 - More alert and able to concentrate
 - Less drowsy
 - Less irritable and depressed
 - Less likely to have an accident when driving

How should I stop taking my benzodiazepine or z-drug?

1. DO NOT stop taking your medicine suddenly

You should discuss stopping your medicine with your doctor, pharmacist or practice nurse to make sure that you reduce your dose slowly. Different people will need to reduce their dose at different speeds. Once you have decided to stop, it is important that you make this a slow gradual process, as this will give you a better chance of long-term success. It is important that you take it at your own pace – one that feels right for you.

2. Plan how you will reduce and stop

Your doctor, pharmacist or practice nurse will give you advice on how you should reduce the dose of your medicine and help you think about other ways of dealing with your worries/sleep problems. Depending on which medicine you are taking, it may be easier to withdraw if you change to diazepam tablets. Diazepam tablets are available in a number of different strengths, which makes it easier to reduce your dose more slowly. Your doctor, pharmacist or practice nurse will let you know if you can change to diazepam and will tell you how you can reduce your dose. Most people find that about one to two weeks between each dose reduction works for them, but everyone should find their own level.

3. Keep a diary

Keeping a diary can help as it records your progress and achievements. This will give you more confidence and encouragement to carry on.

4. Don't go back!

When people begin to reduce their dose, they often become more able to deal with normal day-to-day events and may feel much better. However, it is also common to have a bad patch at some time during the process. If you feel you are going through a bad patch, stick with the current dose until you feel ready to reduce again; this may take several weeks but it is important that you take it at your own pace. Any reduction in dose is a step in the right direction.

5. Be aware of possible side effects

If your medicine is reduced slowly it is unlikely that you will have any side effects, but it is a good idea to be aware of possible side effects as they will tell you that you may need to reduce more slowly:

- *Aches and pains* can be common when reducing the dose of benzodiazepines and z-drugs; taking painkillers can help you feel better.
- *Sleeping problems* may occur when reducing your dose, so it is important to get some exercise as this can help you sleep. Try not to worry about not sleeping; the more you worry about not getting sleep, the less sleep you are likely to get.
- *Stomach and bowel problems*, such as diarrhoea and irritable bowel syndrome may occur. These symptoms usually disappear after stopping the medicine completely, but you may wish to discuss them with your doctor or pharmacist.
- *Sinus problems* can cause sinus pain; taking painkillers can help.
- *Vivid dreams and nightmares* may occur. As you reduce your dose, your dreaming will return and although they may sometimes be disturbing, it is a sign that your sleep is returning to normal and that your body is re-adjusting successfully.
- *Hot flushes and shivering*. The feeling of burning and extreme heat and sweating is also common, while some people can suddenly feel cold.
- *Panic attacks* can be very distressing but they are never fatal and usually last no more than 30 minutes. Getting control of your breathing by taking slower and deeper breaths will help you feel less panic.
- *Anxiety* may be mistaken for the condition that your medicine was prescribed for in the first place.
- *Agoraphobia* is a type of anxiety disorder in which you fear and often avoid places or situations that might cause you to panic and make you feel trapped, helpless or embarrassed. Usually, as you continue to reduce your dose, these feelings go away.

With time these symptoms should pass – don't give up. Good luck!

Adapted with the kind permission of the All Wales Medicines Strategy Group Educational Pack Material to Support Appropriate Prescribing of Hypnotics and Anxiolytics across Wales.