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11<sup>th</sup> September 2020

Circular 024/20

**Re: Benzodiazepines and Z-Drugs**

Dear Doctor,

New resources for prescribers are available to raise public awareness of the potential harm associated with benzodiazepines and z-drugs:

- Insomnia and Anxiety Medicines- Patient Guide (*to print the patient guide, set the printer settings to 'print on two sides (flip on short edge)' to ensure correct layout*)
- Insomnia and Anxiety Medicines- poster for waiting areas

The resources were developed by the HSE in collaboration with the Medical Council, Irish College of General Practitioners, Department of Health, Pharmaceutical Society of Ireland, Health Products Regulatory Authority, Office of the Nursing and Midwifery Services Director and the Nursing and Midwifery Board of Ireland.

The Medical Council has issued advice to all doctors prescribing benzodiazepines, z-drugs and pregabalin to follow best practice guidelines and to only prescribe these medicines when absolutely required. Dr Rita Doyle, President of the Medical Council has provided a letter to support you in patient consultations regarding benzodiazepines, z-drugs and pregabalin (enclosed).

Printed versions of the resources will be distributed to your practice in the coming months. Resources have also been made available to community pharmacists.

Yours faithfully,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Shaun Flanagan'.

Shaun Flanagan  
Primary Care Eligibility & Reimbursement



22<sup>nd</sup> June 2020

**Re: Prescribing benzodiazepines, pregabalin and z-drugs**

Dear Colleagues,

The Irish Medical Council has advised all doctors to follow best practice guidelines and to only prescribe benzodiazepines, pregabalin and z-drugs when absolutely necessary.

The Medical Council's role is to protect patients and support doctors. The Medical Council takes a very serious view of the inappropriate prescribing of these medications.

When necessary, in order to protect the public, the Medical Council will take disciplinary action against doctors who overprescribe these medications. The Medical Council acknowledges that inappropriate prescribing of benzodiazepines, z-drugs, and pregabalin is having a significant impact on patient safety and wellbeing.

Any doctor whose level of prescribing is above the normal range, who is not working in an exceptional area of practice, and who does not make any effort to refer their patients to support or reduce their high-prescribing levels, may require formal investigation by the Medical Council.

Yours sincerely

Dr Rita Doyle  
President of the Medical Council

# Anxiety

Anxiety is a common feeling that everyone experiences at some stage. But it can become a problem when there is no obvious reason for it or it persists for more than a couple of weeks.

There are things you can do to reduce feelings of anxiety.

To start with, identify the times you get anxious and what causes you stress. Are there things that make the situation better or worse? Are there things that you can do to make you feel more relaxed?

Try to:

- Remind yourself that this is a feeling that will pass
- Eat healthy food and exercise regularly
- Find ways to relax that work for you, like going for a walk or taking time out for yourself
- Talk to a friend, family member or doctor about what's making you feel anxious
- Give it time - you can learn to manage feelings of anxiety and not let them take over.

# Support

## YourMentalHealth.ie

has practical advice, services and supports to take care of your mental health.

The YourMentalHealth information line is a 24-hour phone service you can call any time.

You can call anytime to get information on supports and services and how to access them.

**Freephone: 1800 111 888**

## Extra support for anxiety

If you are feeling so anxious that it's impacting on your day-to-day life, you might need some extra support.

Your doctor or a psychologist can help you. You may be referred to a specialist for further support.

Patient information leaflets for medicines are available on [hpra.ie](http://hpra.ie) or from your pharmacist.



# INSOMNIA AND ANXIETY MEDICINES

## PATIENT GUIDE



# What are benzodiazepines and z-drugs?

Benzodiazepines are a group of medicines that can be prescribed to help with sleeping problems (insomnia), or severe anxiety.

Z-drugs can be prescribed to help with sleeping problems.

Benzodiazepines and z-drugs may work well for a short period of two to four weeks.

If you use them for longer, the medicine may lose its effect and you may become dependent.

Talk to your doctor or pharmacist about reducing your dose slowly.

**Do not stop taking a benzodiazepine or z-drug suddenly.**

# Why is my doctor reluctant to prescribe these medicines?

## Clumsiness and drowsiness

People taking these medicines are more likely to have a fall.

Your ability to drive safely may be reduced by these medicines.

## Tolerance and addiction

Your body may get used to the effect of these medicines very quickly, and they may no longer be effective.

Some people may become addicted to benzodiazepines and z-drugs, which may make it difficult to stop taking them.

Withdrawal symptoms can occur if the medicine is stopped suddenly. These include anxiety, headaches, restlessness and sweating.

## Mental health changes

Some people can become aggressive, agitated and confused.

**If you are experiencing any side-effects from benzodiazepines or z-drugs, talk to your doctor or pharmacist.**

Do not stop taking a benzodiazepine or z-drug without taking to your doctor first.

# Tips for sleeping

Here are some changes you can make to improve your quality of sleep

## Try to

- Go to bed and wake up at the same time every day
- Relax at least 1 hour before bed e.g. take a bath or read a book
- Only go to bed when you are tired
- Get up and do something relaxing if you don't fall asleep straight away
- Make sure your bed is comfortable and your bedroom is dark and quiet
- Exercise regularly during the day.

## Don't

- Eat a big meal late at night
- Exercise in the 4 hours before bedtime
- Nap during the day
- Sleep in after a bad night's sleep
- Smoke, or drink alcohol, tea or coffee before going to bed.

Talk to your doctor if you are still having difficulty sleeping or if your insomnia is affecting your daily life.



# TALK TO YOUR DOCTOR

About your prescription for sleeping tablets or anxiety medicines

Long-term use may cause you harm. Your Doctor can help you to come off your medicine gradually.



An Roinn Sláinte  
Department of Health



Bord Ailtránais agus  
Cnáimhseachais na hÉireann  
Nursing and Midwifery  
Board of Ireland



Comhairle na nDochtúirí Leighis  
Medical Council



The Pharmacy Regulator  
An Rialtóir Cogaiscúcháin



An tUdarás Rialála Tairgí Sláinte  
Health Products Regulatory Authority



Medicines Management  
Programme