

# Benzodiazepines

## What are benzodiazepines?

Benzodiazepines are commonly prescribed medications, accounting for around one in every 20 prescriptions written by GPs in Australia. Benzodiazepines are usually prescribed in a tablet or capsule form for oral use. Occasionally they are used in ways other than as prescribed, including by injection.

Benzodiazepines are also known as 'benzos' and are also a type of sedative. They may also be referred to as sleeping tablets or sleeping pills. Benzodiazepines are prescribed for a range of problems, including anxiety and insomnia. They have anxiolytic (anxiety-reducing), sedative and muscle relaxant effects. They can also reduce or stop convulsions. They can be addictive, so are usually prescribed for short-term problems; only for a few weeks usage or for very occasional use. The most well-known is diazepam or Valium.



## What is Stilnox?

Stilnox (zolpidem) is another drug that is sometimes prescribed for sleep problems. It isn't strictly a benzodiazepine, but it has similar characteristics. It has received a lot of media attention in recent years due to people having accidents while sleepwalking under the influence. It is also considered to be habit-forming (addictive) and regular use is not recommended.

## How many people use benzodiazepines?

There is no data specifically on benzodiazepines, but according to the 2013 [National Drug Strategy Household Survey](#), 1.6% of Australians aged 14 and over reported having used any form of tranquiliser for non-medical purposes in the past 12 months.

Use was highest among males aged 30-39, with 3.8% reporting recent use of a tranquiliser for non-medical purposes.

## What are the effects?

Benzodiazepines are depressant drugs, meaning that they slow down the central nervous system, or reduce the function of the brain and body.

They can cause feelings of relaxation and mild contentment, or even sedation and total blackout. Once swallowed, they usually take about half an hour to take effect. The length of time the effects last for varies.

### Effects of benzodiazepines may include:

- Muscle relaxation
- Slow pulse rate
- A feeling of calmness
- Slow pulse rate
- Drowsiness
- Shallow breathing
- Dizziness
- Slurred speech
- Blurred vision
- Confusion
- Loss of balance and coordination
- A 'hangover' effect the following day
- Blackouts

## What are the risks?

If used as prescribed and recommended, benzodiazepines are effective medications. However, there are risks, particularly if they're not used properly, or are used regularly (e.g. daily) for more than a few weeks.

### These include:

- **Dependence**
- **Aggression or violence**, particularly if the dose is high, the person is quite impulsive, has a history of aggression, or is also under the influence of alcohol
- **Skin and vein problems** (if injected)
- **Withdrawals**, which can lead to seizures and death if not managed correctly
- **Blackouts**
- **Overdose**, especially if the person also drinks alcohol, takes other depressant drugs (e.g. heroin) or takes opioid painkillers (e.g. OxyContin or morphine)
- **Sedation**, including impairing driving the day following use