

BENZODIAZEPINES

Some tips when you are coming off a benzodiazepine

- It is best to wait until any life crisis has past, and your level of stress is as low as can be.
- Consider starting the reduction whilst on holiday, when you have less pressure from work, family, etc.
- You may have a period of worse sleep when you are coming off the tablets. Try to anticipate and accept this.
- Consider telling family or friends that you are coming off a benzodiazepine. They may give you encouragement and support.
- Consider joining a local self-help group. Advice and support from other people in similar circumstances, or who have come off a benzodiazepine, can be very helpful.
- Your original anxiety symptoms may return. Consider other ways of tackling your symptoms. For example, learning to relax, or joining an anxiety management group. If anxiety symptoms persist or are severe, your doctor may advise on other treatments.

- If you are taking other addictive drugs in addition to benzodiazepines, then you may need specialist help at coming off the various drugs. Your doctor will be able to advise about, or refer you on to, local services which can help.

Further sources of help and advice

Your local doctor or practice nurse will usually be able to advise on local self-help groups, anxiety management groups, etc.

Community Addiction Teams

South and East Belfast, Tel 028 90737573

North and West Belfast, Tel:028 90566057

Down and Lisburn, Tel:028 44613311

North Down and Ards, Tel:028 91512159

Voluntary Organisations

Dunlewey Substance Advice Centre

226 Stewartstown Road

Belfast BT17 0LB

Tel: 028 90611162

NICAS(Northern Ireland Community Addiction Service)

40 Elmwood Ave

Belfast BT9 6AZ

Tel:028 90664434

STOPPING LONG-TERM BENZODIAZEPINES

Stopping a benzodiazepine which you have taken for more than 4 weeks can be difficult because of withdrawal effects. However, a gradual reduction of dose over a number of weeks will usually work.

What are benzodiazepines and what are they used for?

Benzodiazepines are a group of medicines which are sometimes used to treat anxiety. Common examples include diazepam (Valium), and lorazepam (Ativan). Some types, such as temazepam and nitrazepam are also used as sleeping tablets.

Zaleplon, zolpidem, and zopiclone are other sleeping tablets. They are not benzodiazepines but they work in a similar way.

If you are not used to taking benzodiazepines, when you first take them they are usually very good at easing the symptoms of anxiety, or causing sleep. You can usually stop a benzodiazepine medicine without any problems if you take it for just a short time (less than 2-4 weeks).

What happens if you take benzodiazepines long-term?

Tolerance

If you take a benzodiazepine regularly, after a few weeks the body and brain often become used to the benzodiazepine. It gradually loses its effect. The initial dose then has little effect. You then need a higher dose for it to work.

In time, the higher dose does not work, and you need an even higher dose, and so on. This effect is called 'tolerance'.

Dependence

There is a good chance that you will become dependent on a benzodiazepine if you take it for more than 4 weeks. This means that withdrawal symptoms occur if the tablets are stopped suddenly. (You need the medication to feel 'normal'.) Possible withdrawal symptoms include:

- Anxiety, panic attacks, odd sensations, feeling as if you are outside your body, or just feeling awful. Rarely, a serious mental breakdown can occur.
- Sweating, unable to sleep, headache, tremor, feeling sick, palpitations, muscle spasms, and being oversensitive to light, sound and touch. Rarely, convulsions can occur.
- In some cases the withdrawal symptoms seem like the original anxiety symptoms.

Withdrawal symptoms may last just a few days, but can last up to 6 weeks. They may not start for 2 days after stopping the tablet, and tend to be worst in the first week or so. Some people have minor 'residual' withdrawal symptoms for several months.

So, you may end up taking medication to prevent withdrawal symptoms. Because of 'tolerance', the medication is no longer helping the original anxiety symptoms.

Stopping long-term benzodiazepines

If you have been taking a benzodiazepine for over 4 weeks and want to come off it, it is best to discuss the problem with a doctor. Some people can stop taking benzodiazepines without any difficulty. However, to keep withdrawal effects to a minimum, it is often best to reduce the dose of the medicine gradually over a number of weeks before finally stopping it. Your doctor will advise on how best to do this.

Diazepam withdrawal plan

A common plan is to switch from whatever benzodiazepine tablet you are taking to diazepam. The dosages can be altered very gradually and more easily than with other benzodiazepines.

Your doctor will be able to prescribe the right dose of diazepam for you. After this, you can decide with your doctor how to gradually reduce the dose. A common plan is to reduce the dose by about 2mg every 2-4 weeks. But, some people prefer a more gradual reduction in dose. Also, the last few dose reductions before finally stopping completely may be best done more gradually.

The gradual reduction of dose keeps any withdrawal symptoms to a minimum.