Going Beyond Benzodiazepines

Assisting individuals in their recovery from benzodiazepine dependence

DO I HAVE AN ISSUE WITH BENZOS?

☐ Have you taken a BNZ for 4 months or longer?
☐ Have you ever increased your dose or felt need to?
☐ Have you tried to cut down and couldn’t?
☐ Do you feel sick or anxious if you miss a dose?
☐ Are the effects of BNZ interfering with your life?
☐ Are you drinking or using drugs with your BNZ?
☐ Do you make sure that you never miss a dose?
☐ Do you feel like you need it to get through the day?
☐ Do you take extra pills to help you cope with stress?
☐ Do you ever carry your BNZ with you just in case?

If you answered yes to one or more of the questions above you may be benzodiazepine dependent.

CAN BENZOS BE DANGEROUS?

Benzodiazepines can interact with some medications leading to extreme drowsiness, difficulty breathing, and loss of consciousness. Drinking alcohol or using other drugs with benzos can be very dangerous and can lead to a coma or even death.

This medication can affect your ability to drive and operate equipment safety and could you put at risk for an accident.

Older adults need to be especially careful because they are more easily affected by the medication and are more likely to become confused, have poor coordination and higher risk of falling.

Pregnant women should avoid these medications because it may cause a birth defect, such as cleft palate, ‘floppy baby syndrome’ and premature labor.

Long Term Effects of Benzodiazepines

- Skin rashes and weight gain
- Memory issues or difficulty thinking
- Insomnia
- Anxiety, depression and mood swings
- Irritability, paranoia and aggression
- Fatigue, drowsiness and sleepiness
- Lack of motivation, lethargy, and weakness
- Loss of balance and coordination
- Headaches
- Nausea
- Personality changes

GETTING HELP

If you are worried that your benzodiazepine use is affecting your health, relationships, work, school, financial, family or other situations, you should find help.

Further Information

SAMHSA - Substance Abuse and Mental Health Administration
http://beta.samhsa.gov/find-help
National Institute on Drug Abuse – The science of drug abuse and addiction
http://www.drugabuse.gov/
NCADD - National Council on Alcoholism and Drug Dependence
http://www.ncadd.org/

Support

Addiction Survivors - An organization dedicated to providing peer support communities
http://www.addictionsurvivors.org/
Addiction Treatment Helpline – Information for those seeking help with substance issues at 866-500-2323
http://www.addictiontreatmenthelpline.com/
Choose Help – A resource website with treatment center listing and a community forum

Beyond the Brain

www.beyondthebrain.net
WHAT ARE BENZODIAZEPINES?
Benzodiazepines (ben-zoh-die-az-uh-peens) are a group of medications that are used for a variety of issues, like insomnia, muscle spasms, and anxiety. They’re also called “benzos”, tranquilizers, sedatives and hypnotics.

Research shows that if these meds are taken regularly for more than a few weeks, a person may become dependent on them.

Some examples include: Alprazolam (Xanax), Clonazepam (Klonopin), Diazepam (Valium), Lorazepam (Ativan) and Temazepam (Restoril)

WHY ARE THEY PRESCRIBED?
Most prescriptions for benzodiazepines are given to help someone cope with anxiety or insomnia, often related to personal problems. They can also be prescribed for other reasons, such as seizures, muscle spasms, detox from alcohol, and before medical procedures.

HOW DO BENZODIAZEPINES WORK?
Benzodiazepines slow the nervous system down by changing chemicals in the brain. This affects emotions, memory, thinking, and body movement. One dose of the medication can last from one hour to many hours.

Benzodiazepines are useful as a short term treatment to issues with anxiety and insomnia. However, in some cases they can make a problem worse, for example with PTSD-related anxiety.

HOW CAN I STOP TAKING MY BENZODIAZEPINE?
If you have been on a benzodiazepine for a long time, you may be nervous about stopping it. The choice to stop is an important one and you should understand the benefits and risks for you. Talk to your healthcare provider before making your decision.

Don’t Just Stop - People who take a benzodiazepine regularly are at risk for uncomfortable side effects and withdrawal when they try to stop quickly or “cold turkey”. Stopping slowly will give you the best chance of success!

Plan Ahead – Talk to your provider about your plan to cut back and eventually stop taking the medication. If you are on more than one medication in this family, you will probably need to stabilize on just one before you can start to reduce your medication. The process can take as little as a few weeks, but for others getting off benzodiazepines can take months.

Meds Are Not Enough – Even with a good tapering schedule in place to cut back on withdrawal symptoms, going without meds can cause some people anxiety. This is why it is very important that you get involved in therapy to learn new ways of dealing with that anxiety. Cognitive Behavioral Therapy or CBT is one type of therapy that has proven helpful in managing sleep problems, depression, anxiety and chronic pain.

CAN I BECOME ADDICTED?
Most people who take benzodiazepines are not addicted to or abusing them, but follow their prescriber’s directions. But even at low doses, people can become dependent on the medication to function, even after just one month. Over time, changes happen in the body that cause a person to have uncomfortable and possibly dangerous symptoms if they stop the medication.

In addition to the body needing the medication, a benzodiazepine user can become tolerant to the effects of the medication. This is when someone needs to have more and more of a medication to have the same effect. Some research has shown that this can happen after four months.

HOW WILL I FEEL IF I STOP?
Withdrawal symptoms of benzodiazepines may be very similar to the reason why the medication was prescribed in the first place. How bad the withdrawal symptoms varies person to person. It is also affected by which specific medication was used, the amount taken, the length of time it has been used and whether it is stopped quickly or slowly.

Typically, withdrawal symptoms begin within a few days, but can sometimes appear up to a week after decreasing or stopping the medication. The timing is affected by what type of medication is being taken and how long it stays in the body.