



## Patient information leaflet – Benzodiazepines and Z-drugs

### What are benzodiazepines and Z drugs?

Benzodiazepines are a group of medicines prescribed for anxiety, sleeping problems (insomnia) and other disorders. Examples include: temazepam, nitrazepam, diazepam and lorazepam.

Z-drugs include zopiclone and zolpidem. Z-drugs act in a similar way to benzodiazepines and are sometimes prescribed for short term insomnia.

### How do benzodiazepines and Z-drugs work?

Benzodiazepines and Z-drugs work by decreasing the excitability of brain cells. This has a calming effect on various functions of the brain, which results in sedation, reduced anxiety and muscle relaxation.

### How long should these drugs be taken for?

Benzodiazepines and Z-drugs should only be taken for a short period of time (2 to 4 weeks maximum). If taken for longer than a few weeks various problems and side effects can occur.

A short supply of the medicines will be provided (usually a maximum of 2 weeks) and your doctor will review you after 2 weeks.

### What are the side effects of benzodiazepines and Z-drugs?

- **Tolerance** – if taken for longer than a few weeks, the body and brain become used to the benzodiazepine or Z-drug. The medicine then gradually loses its effect and you 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, until the risks outweigh the benefit of taking the medicine.
- **Dependence (addiction)** – there is a good chance that you will become dependent on a benzodiazepine or Z-drug if you take it for more than four weeks. In effect, you need the medicine to feel normal and you will suffer from withdrawal symptoms if you suddenly stop taking the tablets. Common withdrawal symptoms include anxiety, depression, tremor, rebound insomnia, irritability, restlessness and agitation. Some symptoms may be similar to the initial problem so it is important they are not taken for long periods of time to avoid confusion. Withdrawal symptoms often last up to six weeks sometimes longer and tend to be worse in the first week or so.
- **Other side effects:** drowsiness and light-headedness the next day; confusion; accidents and falls; memory loss; low mood; muscle weakness; constipation; slurred speech; nausea (feeling sick); dry mouth and blurred vision.

### What should you do if you have been taking a benzodiazepine or Z-drug for a long time?

Some people who have been taking a benzodiazepine or Z drug for a long time believe that the medicine is still helping to ease anxiety or sleeping problems. However, in fact, in many people the medicine is just preventing withdrawal symptoms.

If you have been taking a benzodiazepine or Z drug for over four weeks and want to come off it, you should discuss it with your GP. You should not stop taking your benzodiazepine or Z-drug without first seeking advice from your GP.

Some people can stop taking benzodiazepines or Z drugs with little difficulty. However, some people develop withdrawal symptoms if they suddenly stop taking a benzodiazepine or Z drug. To keep withdrawal effects to a minimum, it is best to reduce the dose of the medicine gradually over a number of weeks or months before finally stopping it. Your doctor will advise on dosages and time scale, as this will be individual to each patient.

You can find more information on these medicines at:

<https://www.choiceandmedication.org/nsft/printable-leaflets/patient-information-leaflets/143/ALL/>

<http://www.rcpsych.ac.uk/expertadvice/treatmentswellbeing/benzodiazepines.aspx>

<http://www.nhs.uk/Conditions/Insomnia/Pages/Prevention.aspx>

<http://www.nhs.uk/Conditions/Anxiety/Pages/Treatment.aspx>

<https://patient.info/health/insomnia-poor-sleep/benzodiazepines-and-z-drugs>

<https://www.mind.org.uk/information-support/drugs-and-treatments/sleeping-pills-and-minor-tranquillisers/about-benzodiazepines/#.XG62VsKnzIU>



### Good Sleep Guide

Sleeping tablets are usually only prescribed for a short course to help get over a particularly bad patch and to establish a sleep pattern. The following tips will help to establish a sleeping pattern and should be continued after the medicine is stopped.

- ✓ Sleep duration varies from day to day. Try not to worry about sleeping.
- ✓ Establish a regular sleeping pattern by having fixed times for going to bed and waking up (including at weekends); avoid sleeping in after a poor night's sleep and avoid daytime naps.
- ✓ Try to relax before going to bed and avoid anything mentally demanding within 90 minutes of bedtime.
- ✓ Do not watch television or use any back lit device e.g. tablets and phones for an hour before trying to go to sleep. The use of non-backlit e-readers and paper books is not thought to adversely affect sleep.
- ✓ Take regular exercise throughout the day but avoid strenuous exercise within four hours of bedtime.
- ✓ Avoid caffeine, nicotine, and alcohol within 6 hours of going to bed (consider complete elimination of caffeine from the diet). Caffeine and nicotine are stimulants which could keep you awake.
- ✓ Do not eat a heavy meal before bedtime.
- ✓ Create a bedtime routine to help set your body up for a restful night (take a warm bath, do some light yoga stretches, read a book, listen to relaxing music).
- ✓ If you have problems getting off to sleep have a mug of warm milk, Horlicks, Ovaltine or herbal tea.
- ✓ The bedroom should be dark, quiet and a relaxing place. The room should be not too hot or cold<sup>2</sup>.
- ✓ Refrain from using the bedroom to eat or perform any work related activities, using it only for sleep.
- ✓ If after 30 minutes you cannot get to sleep, get up and go into another room and try to do something else (light reading or listening to relaxing music) until you feel sleepy, then go back to bed.
- ✓ Avoid taking over the counter sleep aids, as although they may help in short term use, they do not help the underlying problem causing disturbed sleep.
- ✓ Consider recording a sleep diary. This can help to identify any lifestyle habits or daily activities that contribute to sleeping problems.
- ✓ A good sleep pattern may take weeks to establish, but it can be achieved.

