

## Tapering Benzodiazepine Medications: A Guide for Patients

Some medications may help for a short time but can be harmful when used longer term. Medication needs may also change over time. You may be interested in tapering your benzodiazepine medication for many reasons. For example, you may:

- Be concerned about the risk for harm from benzodiazepines
- Want to avoid side effects
- Want to reduce the number of medications you take daily
- Feel the medicine is no longer helping you manage your health concerns

### What are Benzodiazepines

Benzodiazepines are often prescribed to treat anxiety and sleep problems. Although these medicines may be effective for a short period of time (eg, a few weeks) other treatments are safer and may be equally or more effective longer-term. Benzodiazepines are generally not recommended for older adults, even for short term use.

Examples of Benzodiazepines

- Alprazolam (Xanax®)
- Clordiazepoxide (Librium®)
- Clonazepam (Klonopin®)
- Clorazepate (Tranxene®)
- Diazepam (Valium®)
- Flurazepam (Dalmane®)
- Lorazepam (Ativan®)
- Oxazepam (Serax®)
- Temazepam (Restoril®)
- Triazolam (Halcion®)

### Risks of Benzodiazepines

Benzodiazepine use can lead to:

- problems with memory and concentration
- daytime sleepiness
- falls
- car accidents
- physical dependence
- withdrawal symptoms when you stop or reduce your dose
- accidental overdose (eg, when taken with opioids or alcohol)

#### **Stopping benzodiazepines suddenly can cause serious withdrawal symptoms**

Nearly everyone who takes these medicines regularly for more than a month will develop physical dependence. This means that if you stop the medicine suddenly you may experience withdrawal symptoms which can be very severe and long lasting. Your dose should be reduced slowly in partnership with your doctor.

**Physical dependence is not the same as a substance use disorder, or addiction.** Almost everyone who takes benzodiazepines regularly for more than a month will become physically dependent, even when the medication is taken as prescribed.

In contrast, benzodiazepine use disorder happens in less than 2% of people taking benzodiazepines. Talk to your doctor if you are using more than your doctor recommends, are having trouble controlling how much you use, or think you may have a substance use disorder.

## Tapering Benzodiazepines

If you have been taking benzodiazepines daily or most days for more than a month you are probably physically dependent. **You should not stop taking the medication suddenly.** Your dose should be reduced slowly to minimize withdrawal symptoms.

### Working with your Doctor

Your doctor will work with you to develop a strategy for slowly reducing the medication. The goal is to reduce the dose slowly to minimize withdrawal symptoms.

Your doctor may recommend starting with a small dose reduction, usually between 5-10% of your current dose. Then they will monitor your response. If you are experiencing bothersome symptoms, they may recommend you stay at the current dose for longer or make smaller dose reductions.

Your doctor will consider whether you need other treatments for your health conditions. They may recommend you start other medication or cognitive behavioral therapy before beginning to reduce your BZD dose.

Talk with your doctor about:

- Other treatment options for your underlying health problem – such as anxiety or insomnia. What are the potential risks and benefits of the available treatments for you?
- Options for how to reduce your dose. For example, would you prefer to:
  - Make small to moderate reductions each month or very small reductions each week?
  - Start by reducing your morning or evening dose (if you take the medicine twice a day)?
- Any concerns you have about reducing your medication
- How they will work with you to manage any withdrawal symptoms

### Tapering Tips

- People respond differently to reducing their benzodiazepine dose. Some will need to go slower than others. **Your symptoms should guide decisions about dose reductions.**
- Withdrawal symptoms may emerge up to a week after reducing your dose.
- Withdrawal symptoms may increase as you get close to the end of the taper.
- **Talk to your doctor if you experience symptoms that are hard to manage.** There are many ways they can help.
- If you have been taking benzodiazepines for a long time it may take more than a year to fully stop the medication.
- Your risks of harm from benzodiazepine medication go down as you decrease your dose.
- Withdrawal symptoms may continue even after the taper is complete. Talk with your doctor if you experience this.
- Counseling and other support can help during this process.
  - Consider asking your doctor for a referral to a counselor or peer support specialist
  - There are also free online patient support groups that may help

## Withdrawal Symptoms

Some Potential Benzodiazepine Withdrawal Signs and Symptoms\*

General	Mood	Heart Concerns	Gastrointestinal
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• High blood pressure</li><li>• Headaches</li><li>• Sweating, night sweats</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Anxiety, panic attacks</li><li>• Depression</li><li>• Irritability, agitation, aggression</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Chest pain</li><li>• Heart palpitations</li><li>• Fast heartbeat</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Stomach cramps</li><li>• Diarrhea</li><li>• Nausea and vomiting</li></ul>
Neurological	Nerves and Muscles	Psychiatric	Sleep
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Poor memory</li><li>• Reduced concentration</li><li>• Confusion</li><li>• Dizziness</li><li>• Seizures</li><li>• Sensitivity to light, sound, taste, or smell</li><li>• Tingling, numbness</li><li>• Ringing in the ears</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Poor coordination or balance</li><li>• Abnormal movements</li><li>• Muscle pain, weakness, or spasms</li><li>• Muscle twitches or jerks</li><li>• Tremors</li><li>• Nerve pain</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Restlessness</li><li>• Detachment or dissociation</li><li>• Psychosis (eg, paranoia)</li><li>• Suicidal thoughts and self-harm</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Excessive sleepiness</li><li>• Insomnia or poor sleep</li><li>• Nightmares</li></ul>

## Resources for Tapering Support

Many patients noted that *The Ashton Manual* and *The Maudsley Deprescribing Guidelines* were helpful to read for BZD tapers.

- Benzodiazepines: How They Work and How to Withdraw (The Ashton Manual). <https://www.benzoinfo.com/ashtonmanual/>
- *Chapter 3: Safe Deprescribing of Benzodiazepines and Z-drugs*. The Maudsley Deprescribing Guidelines: Antidepressants, Benzodiazepines, Gabapentinoids and Z-drugs. WILEY Blackwell; 2024.

Liquid Tapering methods may help for smaller dose decreases.

<https://www.benzoinfo.com/benzodiazepine-tapering-strategies/>

Compounding pharmacies can create custom medications. Alliance for Pharmacy Compounding (<https://a4pc.org/>)

Patient handouts on specific medications (<https://www.deprescribingnetwork.ca/patient-handouts>)