

Getting through Benzodiazepine Withdrawal

Please note this factsheet is only a guide. If you are thinking about managing your benzodiazepine use seek advice from your doctor to get support tailored to your needs.
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What are benzodiazepines?

Benzodiazepines may also be referred to as 'benzos' or 'downers', and include medications like *Valium* (diazepam), *Xanax* (alprazolam) and temazepam. The main effects of benzodiazepines are sedation, reduced anxiety and muscle relaxation. They can be effective for these purposes when used short term (e.g. 1-2 weeks) but can become very addictive and stop working if taken for longer periods.

What is a benzodiazepine withdrawal?

Benzodiazepine withdrawal is a group of symptoms that occur after stopping or decreasing the amount of benzodiazepines you use. Benzodiazepine withdrawal symptoms may be physical or emotional, and are temporary.

FOR SOME PEOPLE, PARTICULARLY THOSE WHO HAVE USED HIGH DOSE OF BENZODIAZEPINES FOR A LONG TIME, WITHDRAWAL COMPLICATIONS CAN INCLUDE DELIRIUM (A SUDDEN CONFUSED STATE) AND SEIZURES

It is therefore very important that you talk to your doctor, to have your risk for these complications assessed and managed before any benzodiazepine withdrawal.

What to expect in withdrawal

Different people will experience benzodiazepine withdrawal differently. Talk to your doctor about how to gradually reduce and stop your benzodiazepine use, as this can reduce the severity of your withdrawal.

Some people may find withdrawal more challenging than others. If you are finding benzodiazepine withdrawal hard see your doctor to get support.

How long does withdrawal last?

Benzodiazepine withdrawal symptoms typically start within 24 hours of stopping. The experience of withdrawal symptoms typically subsides, and then stops after a few weeks. It is uncommon, but possible, for some people to experience a longer-lasting withdrawal.

What symptoms can be experienced in benzodiazepine withdrawal?

Physical symptoms of benzodiazepine withdrawal include:

- Tremor
- Rapid or irregular heart beat
- Sweating
- Muscle tension or pain
- Headaches
- Nausea and vomiting
- Constipation and bloating
- Flu-like symptoms
- Seizures (uncommon)

Emotional symptoms of benzodiazepine withdrawal include:

- Sleep difficulties and sleep disturbance
- Anxiety and panic attacks
- Low mood
- Restlessness, irritability and agitation
- Delirium (uncommon)

What are the benefits of quitting benzodiazepines?

People who use benzodiazepines for a long time may notice that they feel sedated throughout the day, or even emotionally desensitised. People may also start to feel trapped in a cycle of dependence, as benzodiazepine withdrawal symptoms like anxiety and sleep disturbance closely resemble the problems for which people use benzodiazepines short-term.

Older people who use benzodiazepines are also particularly sensitive to the effects of benzodiazepines and can experience confusion, loss of balance and falls.

How can I manage my benzodiazepine use?

Step 1: Get help by talking to your doctor. Your doctor can provide you with support, including a weaning plan to gradually reduce and then stop the benzodiazepines you use. They can also advise if it is recommended that you attend a residential detox to manage your benzodiazepine withdrawal. A residential detox typically lasts 7 days, and is a safer environment to stop benzodiazepines if you are at risk of experiencing a benzodiazepine withdrawal seizure or delirium.

Step 2: Talk to someone and get support. The following services are available to you:

- **Drug and Alcohol Counselling:** Call the *National Alcohol and Other Drug Helpline* (1800 250 015) to be linked in with counselling in your area
- **Online Counselling:** Head to *Counselling Online* (www.counsellingonline.org.au) for web-based drug and alcohol counselling.
- **Peer Support:** Consider getting peer support from *Narcotics Anonymous* (www.na.org.au) or *SMART Recovery* (www.smartrecoveryaustralia.com.au)
- **Reconnexion** (Victoria only): Call Reconnexion (1300 273 266) for help with reducing and stopping benzodiazepines.

What strategies can I use to manage my benzodiazepine use?

- Stay positive and be kind to yourself while you are experiencing benzodiazepine withdrawal
- Spend time with friends and family who support you
- Limit the benzodiazepines you have access to. If you are gradually weaning off benzodiazepines ask your pharmacist or a trusted support to hold onto your prescription and pick up your medication each day or every few days.
- Set goals and rewards for using the money you save by quitting
- Avoid caffeine-containing products like tea, coffee, chocolate and soft drinks. These can make your withdrawal worse.
- Good **nutrition, exercise** and **sleep** will help your body recover and reduce tension
- Warm baths, massage and deep breathing can help with muscle tension or pain
- Sleep difficulties are common in withdrawal so follow these tips to help you sleep:
 - Try to go to bed around the same time each night, and set an alarm to wake at the same time each day
 - Go to sleep when you feel tired
 - If you do not fall asleep within 30 minutes of being in bed get back up and return to bed only when you are feeling tired
- Expect to have cravings to use benzodiazepines; they are a difficult but normal part of withdrawal. Use the 4 D's approach anytime you experience cravings:
 - **Delay** acting on cravings. Remind yourself why you wanted to stop in the first place
 - **Deep breathe.** Take long, slow breaths in and out. Repeat this three times.
 - **Do something else.** Take your mind off benzodiazepines by doing something else: put on some music, keep your hands busy, or go for a walk
 - **Drink water.** Sip water slowly to beat cravings for benzodiazepines. You'll feel better both physically and mentally.
- Consider getting support for any stresses in your life. Stress can make your withdrawal worse than it actually is. Talk to your doctor or consider getting help from a counsellor.
- Most relapses occur within the first week after stopping. Having a specific plan or activity for each day can help you get through the withdrawal period and stay on track.
- Know that sometimes people undertake a number of benzodiazepine withdrawal attempts before succeeding. If you keep this in mind and keep going you will succeed.