

What You Should Know About Opioid and Benzodiazepine Medications

Opioid and benzodiazepine medications are powerful drugs that can be an important part of a treatment plan, but they have serious side effects. If your doctor prescribes one of these medications for you, it's important to understand how you should take the drug and the risks you face when you do.

What are opioids?

Opioids are painkillers that a doctor may prescribe to treat moderate to severe pain. Opioids work by reducing the messages the brain receives about the pain.

Opioids include morphine, oxycodone (OxyContin and Percocet), codeine, hydrocodone (Vicodin and Lortab), and fentanyl—a synthetic opioid that's stronger than other opioids.

What are benzodiazepines?

Benzodiazepines are a large class of drugs that include sedatives and hypnotics. A doctor may prescribe this type of medication to treat anxiety, seizures, muscle spasms or sleep disorders.

Benzodiazepines include diazepam (Valium), lorazepam (Ativan), alprazolam (Xanax) and triazolam (Halcion), among many others.

What should I do if my doctor prescribes one of these drugs for me?

- Ask your doctor questions, including about risks and side effects and whether there are other options to manage your condition.
- Only take your medication as your doctor prescribes. Never take more than that amount.

How do these drugs affect me, and what are the risks of taking them?

These drugs have many side effects, but the most serious are **dependence** and **overdose**. Many people who take them have a high chance of becoming **physically** dependent on the drug. You can become physically dependent in as little as five days. This means:

- You may have withdrawal symptoms if you stop taking the drug.
- You might also build up a **tolerance**, which means your body requires higher and higher doses for the drug to have the same effect.
- An overdose can happen when there is more of the drug in your body than it can handle. An overdose can be fatal.

If you're taking an opioid, ask your doctor if you should have an emergency dose of naloxone medication on hand. In the event of an overdose, it can save your life. Generic naloxone is available at a pharmacy without a prescription.



Dependency is a medical condition with physical symptoms. If you are dependent, your doctor must diagnose you as having **substance use disorder**—the medical term for dependence. Other medications are often used to treat dependence, but without a diagnosis, you may not have access to the medications in some situations, such as when you are outside of your health plan's provider network.

How do I know if I am dependent?

Unfortunately, it's easy to become dependent and not realize it. If two or more of the following statements apply to you, tell your doctor immediately.

- I take more of my medication than I'm supposed to, but I can't help it.
- I have a strong need for my medication.
- I continue to take my medication even though it affects my social activities.
- I continue to take my medication even though it causes me physical or psychological problems.
- I need more of my medication to manage my pain than I used to.
- I am taking my medication as my doctor prescribed, but it no longer helps my pain.

What can I do if I become dependent?

Once you become dependent on a drug, it's hard to stop taking it, and that can be scary. Tell your doctor right away about the symptoms you're having.

This is important because dependence should be treated, just as other medical conditions (like diabetes or heart disease) should be. Your doctor will make sure you receive treatment.

Do not stop taking the drug before talking with your doctor, because you might have withdrawal symptoms if you do.

Remember: Get guidance from your doctor about how the drugs you are prescribed can help you and how they may affect you. That way, you know the benefits and the risks, and you can have a choice in your medication therapy.

