

## What is harm reduction?

Harm reduction is an approach which aims to reduce the risks when taking benzodiazepines or other drugs and encourages safer behaviours. Harm reduction recognises that some people will continue to use benzodiazepines regardless of the risks. However, there are strategies that can be used to help lower the risk of harm when taking benzodiazepines.

## What are benzodiazepines?

Benzodiazepines are depressant drugs which means that they slow down the messaging between the brain and the body. Benzodiazepines are prescription medicines known as minor tranquillisers. They may be prescribed to help people with stress, anxiety or sleep problems; they are intended only for short-term use, maximum 3-4 weeks.

## Benzodiazepines - Onset and duration of effects

Benzodiazepines can be short, intermediate or long acting. The onset and duration of effects vary widely depending on dose, route of administration, and the individual characteristics of the person.

Even though the apparent effects from benzodiazepines may appear to have worn off, they can stay active for a long period of time (24 hrs +) dependent on type. When prescribed, check the label and instructions to better understand the effects, or speak to your Doctor or Pharmacist.

## Looking after yourself

It is important to know that using benzodiazepines is never completely safe. However there are strategies that you can use to reduce the risks. Benzodiazepines may cause harm to your mental or physical health, relationships, behaviours, finances or ability to work, study or care for people. Here are some strategies that can be used to help lower the risks.

- **Have you been prescribed benzodiazepines from your doctor?**

### If so questions you may wish to ask are:

- What are the benefits?
- What are the risks?
- Are there any other alternatives including non-medication-based treatments?
- What would happen if you did not take this medicine?

- **If you agree to using this medication, you may also wish to ask:**

- How long should I take this medication for?
- What are my chances of becoming physically or psychologically dependent upon this medicine?
- How difficult is it to stop taking this medicine?

- **If you are being prescribed benzodiazepines:**

- Take your medication as prescribed. Using a daily dosing box, a blister pack, or daily dispensing from a pharmacy can assist with this.
- Put your benzodiazepines away after use and store in a safe place.

- **Start small.** Benzodiazepines can be short, intermediate or long acting which means that dosage levels can vary. Whether you are using benzodiazepines for the first time or using regularly it's always important to start with a small amount, let them reach their peak, and then carefully consider as to whether you'll have more.
- **Don't use alone.** There are risks when using alone. It's always better to be in a safe environment and with people you trust if something does go wrong. It's also important that if anyone becomes unwell to stay with them and don't let them go off alone.
- **Don't mix.** Mixing benzodiazepines with alcohol or other drugs increases the risk of harm. Mixing benzodiazepines with other depressant drugs, such as alcohol or opioids also increases the risk of overdose.
- **Set limits.** Setting a limit on when and how much you use can help keep your use under control and reduces your risk of developing dependence. If you are taking benzodiazepines that are not prescribed for you having regular breaks gives your brain and body time to recover. The more you break up the pattern of use, the easier it is to manage your use.

**Please note:** For people who are dependent on benzodiazepines, it is recommended that medical advice be sought before stopping or cutting back.

- **Monitor your moods and emotions.** Benzodiazepines can impact your mental health. Some long term mental health effects linked to benzodiazepines use include decreased motivation, mood swings, depression and anxiety.
- **Safer ways of using.** When taking benzodiazepines always use as per the instructions on the label. If you are using in a non-prescribed way such as injecting never share any equipment and always use new sterile equipment. Benzodiazepines tablets are typically not easily dissolved in water. It can be dangerous to try and inject them so advice should be sought from a local needle and syringe program. Crush up and dissolve under your tongue instead of injecting. Injecting benzodiazepines can increase the risk of additional harms such as blood borne viruses, infections, damage to the circulatory system, and overdose.
- **Be prepared and careful.** Benzodiazepines use can impact your decision-making and risky things can become more risky. Some common things to plan for can be your transport home, having your phone charged with credit, and being prepared for safe sex.
- **Don't drive.** Benzodiazepines can affect your ability to drive safely (this also includes riding a bike or scooter). It's against the law to drive or be in charge of a motor vehicle while you are 'under the influence' of benzodiazepines.
- **Pregnancy and benzodiazepines use.** Regular benzodiazepines use throughout pregnancy can cause the new born baby to experience withdrawal symptoms such as drowsiness, respiratory difficulties and low muscle tone. People who are concerned about their benzodiazepines use while pregnant or breastfeeding should talk to their doctor or health professional.
- **Adopt a healthy and balanced and lifestyle.** If you are using benzodiazepines remember to stay hydrated, eat well, sleep and exercise. It's also important to find a balance between work, study, play and rest.
- **Caring for yourself.** If you are using benzodiazepines it can be helpful to have regular check-ups with your GP to monitor your health.

- **Caring for others.** Substance use can affect your children and others around you. Ensure your children remain safe and supervised at all times.

**Please Note:** Sleeping with a child in the same bed while under the influence of substances can be particularly dangerous.

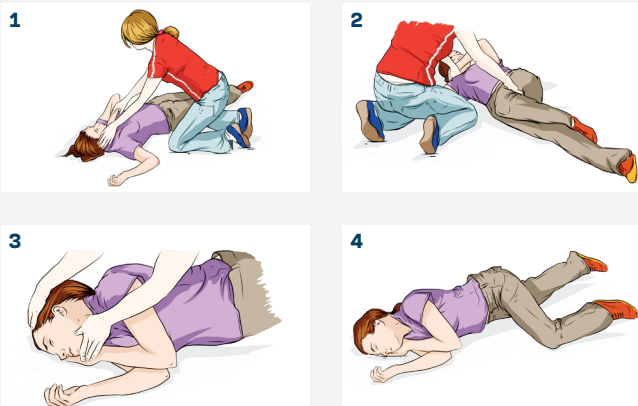
## What help is available?

Adis 24/7 Alcohol and Drug Support is a 24 hour, 7 day a week confidential support service for people in Queensland with alcohol and other drug concerns, their families and health professionals.

**Talk to us. Anytime, anywhere.**  
**1800 177 833**

## What should I do in an emergency?

If a person has overdosed on benzodiazepines call an ambulance on **triple zero (000)**. If they have stopped breathing commence CPR. If they are breathing normally, place them into the recovery position and wait with the person until the ambulance has arrived.



## Disclaimer

This factsheet does not accept, condone or promote the use of alcohol or other drugs. While most people who use benzodiazepines do not suffer serious harms, the use of any drug, whether legal or not, always carries some risk. No amount of planning and care can ensure that your use of benzodiazepines is 'risk free' and the best way to avoid potential harms is to use as prescribed by your Health Professional. By developing this factsheet we are not suggesting that benzodiazepines use is safe.