

# Benzodiazepine Addiction



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### Introduction

Benzodiazepines, sometimes abbreviated BZD or conversationally referred to as "benzos," are a class of psychoactive drugs. The name comes from the chemical structure of the compound, which includes a "benzene" ring and a "diazepine" ring. Benzodiazepines function by enhancing the effects of GABA-A, a neurotransmitter in the brain, which results in a kind of hypnotic sedative effect. Examples of benzodiazepines include Valium and Xanax (generic names diazepam and alprazolam, respectively).

Benzodiazepines are commonly used for the treatment of insomnia, anxiety, seizures, muscle spasms, alcohol withdrawal, and a number of other conditions. When used appropriately over a short period of time, they can be very effective; however, when used in increasing amounts or in another way against the advice of a medical professional, they can cause physical dependence and addiction. Benzodiazepine addictions can involve both physical and a psychological dependence on the drugs, resulting in withdrawal when doses are stopped or reduced.

### Overview and Facts

Benzodiazepines are widely prescribed, with four of them—alprazolam (Xanax), clonazepam (Klonopin), diazepam (Valium) and lorazepam (Ativan)—listed among the top 100 most commonly prescribed medications. According to the APA report on benzodiazepines, 11 to 15 percent of the adult population has taken a benzodiazepine one or more times during the preceding year, but only 1 to 2 percent have taken benzodiazepines daily for 12 months or longer. In psychiatric treatment settings and in substance-abuse populations, however, the prevalence of benzodiazepine use, abuse and dependence is substantially higher than that in the general population.

Among 12-17 year olds, newly diagnosed cases each year have been estimated to be 0.3% while for adults aged 18 and older the estimate was 0.8%. Rates for adult males are slightly higher than for females, however, this pattern has been found to be reversed in adolescents. The rates peak among 18-29 year olds and decreases with age.

### Symptoms

While symptoms of benzodiazepine abuse will vary depending upon the length of time an individual uses the benzo and the amount of the medication taken, some of the symptoms of benzodiazepine addiction are very similar.

Symptoms of benzodiazepine addiction include:

#### *Mood:*

- Problems with attention and concentration
- Memory problems
- Inconsistent moods or mood swings
- Poor judgment

#### *Behavioral:*

- Inappropriate sexual behavior

- Increase in sociability, sometimes to the point the individual becomes overly social to the exclusion of other responsibilities
- Improved or worsened relationships depending on the response of others to the individual's substance use, how the individual presents social, and the degree of change that is evident
- Risk-taking behaviors
- Decrease in inhibitions
- "Doctor shopping" or visiting more than one doctor to obtain a number of refills for benzos
- Stealing or borrowing pills from friends and family
- Mounting legal problems
- Financial ruin
- Anger
- Aggression
- Taking more medication or over longer periods of time than intended
- Impaired occupational or academic functioning

### *Physical:*

- Slurred speech
- Being uncoordinated
- Unsteadiness
- Nystagmus (rapid, uncontrollable eye movements)
- Stupor
- Coma (infrequent unless the benzodiazepine is paired with another substance)
- Lethargy
- Increased sleep

### *Psychological:*

- Changes in personality
- Psychosis
- Hallucinations
- Delusions

## Causes and Risk Factors

The most common causes for benzodiazepine addiction are extending use beyond the original course of treatment and using larger doses than directed although many addicts simply begin using benzos without a prescription.

Risk factors for benzodiazepine addiction include:

Addiction does not have a single root cause; instead it's believed that addiction develops as the combination of many factors working concurrently. These factors may include:

*Genetic:* While there is evidence suggesting a genetic link to addiction disorders, however, whether a specific combination of genes is linked to addiction to specific classes of drugs has yet to be determined. There is evidence that the tendency for addiction to specific classes of drugs runs in families. If you have a first-degree relative who is addicted to benzodiazepines, you have a higher likelihood of also developing an addiction to benzodiazepines.

*Brain Chemistry:* Research suggests that benzodiazepines stop neurons in the brain responsible for preventing surges of the brain's "pleasure" chemicals, creating a surge of pleasure chemicals into the brain.

*Environmental:* High levels of life stressors, especially when perceived as uncontrollable, often lead individuals yearning for relief. Individuals in such circumstances often turn to benzodiazepines to calm their inner anxiety. Many people feel uncomfortable in social situations and benzodiazepines can decrease social anxiety. Their newfound ability to enjoy being social reinforces the use of benzodiazepines until the individual feels they need the benzos to be social.

*Psychological:* Benzodiazepines are used in the management of mental illnesses such as anxiety disorders. If only benzos are used to treat the anxiety and individuals do not receive simultaneous therapy, this can cause an unhealthy reliance on benzodiazepines to manage the mental illness.

## Diagnosis

Criteria for substance addictions are outlined in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM) and include physical tolerance, withdrawal symptoms when the substance is stopped, and failing to cut back on doses over time.

## Treatment

Treatments for benzodiazepine addiction generally begin with a slow detoxification process, eventually weaning a person away from the effects of the drugs while attempting to decrease the severity of the symptoms of withdrawal. As a follow-up to the detoxification program, recovering addicts are encouraged to pursue psychological therapy, group therapy, and other programs to prevent the possibility of relapse.

Benzodiazepine addiction can be difficult, especially when it stems from a desire to relieve symptoms of anxiety or other mental health conditions. UCLA Dual Diagnosis understands the complexities behind substance addiction and the comorbid conditions that have been linked to it; schedule an appointment to learn how we can help you recover from both the physical and psychological consequences of untreated addiction and other psychiatric conditions.

## Sources

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